

The New Testament

Prof. Bart D. Ehrman



The Teaching Company
2000

PUBLISHED BY:

THE GREAT COURSES

Corporate Headquarters

4840 Westfields Boulevard, Suite 500

Chantilly, Virginia 20151-2299

Phone: 1-800-832-2412

Fax: 703-378-3819

www.thegreatcourses.com

Copyright © The Teaching Company, 2000

Printed in the United States of America

This book is in copyright. All rights reserved.

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above,
no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in
or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form, or by any means
(electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise),
without the prior written permission of
The Teaching Company.



Bart D. Ehrman, Ph.D.

Professor, Department of Religious Studies
The University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill

Professor Bart Ehrman is the Bowman and Gordon Gray Professor of Religious Studies at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. With degrees from Wheaton College (B.A.) and Princeton Theological Seminary (M.Div. and Ph.D., magna cum laude), he taught at Rutgers for four years before moving to UNC in 1988. During his tenure at UNC, he has garnered numerous awards and prizes, including the Students' Undergraduate Teaching Award (1993), the Ruth and Philip Hettleman Prize for Artistic and Scholarly Achievement (1994), and now the Bowman and Gordon Gray Award for excellence in teaching (1998).

With a focus on early Christianity in its Greco-Roman environment and a special expertise in the textual criticism of the New Testament, Professor Ehrman has published dozens of book reviews and over 20 scholarly articles for academic journals. He has also authored or edited eight books, including *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford University Press, 1999); *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, 1997; 2nd ed. 1999); *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford, 1999); *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford, 1998); *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993); and (as co-editor) *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research* (Eerdmans, 1996). He is currently at work on a new Greek-English edition of the Apostolic Fathers for the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press).

Professor Ehrman is a popular lecturer, giving numerous talks each year for such groups as the Carolina Speakers Bureau, the UNC Program for the Humanities, the Biblical Archaeology Society, various civic groups, and universities across the nation. He has served as the President of the Society

of Biblical Literature, SE Region; book review editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; editor of the Scholar's Press Monograph Series *The New Testament in the Greek Fathers*; and co-editor of the E.J. Brill series *New Testament Tools and Studies*. Among his administrative responsibilities, he has served on the executive committee of the Southeast Council for the Study of Religion and has chaired the New Testament textual criticism section of the Society of Biblical Religion, as well as serving as Director of Graduate Studies at the Department of Religious Studies at UNC. ■

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Professor Biography	i
Course Scope	1

LECTURE GUIDES

LECTURE 1

The Early Christians and Their Literature	4
---	---

LECTURE 2

The Greco-Roman Context	8
-------------------------------	---

LECTURE 3

Ancient Judaism	14
-----------------------	----

LECTURE 4

The Earliest Traditions About Jesus	20
---	----

LECTURE 5

Mark—Jesus the Suffering Son of God	26
---	----

LECTURE 6

Matthew—Jesus the Jewish Messiah.....	32
---------------------------------------	----

LECTURE 7

Luke—Jesus the Savior of the World	39
--	----

LECTURE 8

John—Jesus the Man from Heaven	45
--------------------------------------	----

LECTURE 9

Noncanonical Gospels.....	51
---------------------------	----

Table of Contents

LECTURE 10

The Historical Jesus—Sources and Problems57

LECTURE 11

The Historical Jesus—Solutions and Methods62

LECTURE 12

Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet66

LECTURE 13

The Acts of the Apostles71

LECTURE 14

Paul—The Man, the Mission, and the *Modus Operandi*.....76

LECTURE 15

Paul and the Crises of His Churches—First Corinthians81

LECTURE 16

Pauline Ethics.....86

LECTURE 17

Paul's Letter to the Romans90

LECTURE 18

Paul, Jesus, and James95

LECTURE 19

The Deutero-Pauline Epistles.....101

LECTURE 20

The Pastoral Epistles.....106

LECTURE 21

The Book of Hebrews and the Rise of Christian Anti-Semitism..... 111

LECTURE 22

First Peter and the Persecution of the Early Christians..... 117

Table of Contents

LECTURE 23

The Book of Revelation	123
------------------------------	-----

LECTURE 24

Do We Have the Original New Testament?	130
--	-----

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Timeline	136
Glossary	139
Biographical Notes	147
Bibliography	151

The New Testament

Scope:

The New Testament is undoubtedly the single most important book in the history of Western civilization, whether seen as a religious book of faith or as a cultural artifact. It is probably also the most widely disputed and misunderstood. The 24 lectures of this course will approach the New Testament from a historical perspective, bracketing questions of belief and theological truth to acquire a historically rich grounding for our understanding of these foundational documents.

The course will begin with four lectures on the historical context in which the New Testament was written, considering both the world of Greco-Roman pagan cults and the world of early Judaism—examining, that is, the beliefs, sacred spaces, liturgical practices, and distinguishing features of the religions surrounding the birth of Christianity.

In the second four lectures of Part I, we will examine the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are our principal sources for knowing about the life and teachings of Jesus; they are also major literary works in their own right, each with its own perspective on who Jesus was and why his life and death matter. A major methodological concern will be to allow each of these books to speak for itself, rather than assume they all portray Jesus in the same way. Individual lectures will be devoted to establishing the distinctive portrayals of Jesus in each of the Gospels. An additional lecture will look at how Jesus is portrayed in two Gospels that did not make it into the New Testament, the Gospels of Peter and Thomas.

Part I concludes with four lectures that will take the results of our discussions and, in a sense, move behind them to see what we can learn about the historical Jesus himself and what he actually said and did. After considering what noncanonical sources (e.g., Roman and Jewish authors) say about Jesus, we will discuss the kinds of criteria historians have devised for using the Gospels not as literary texts but as historical sources for Jesus' life. We will then apply these criteria to reconstruct his actual words and deeds. We will

see that the earliest records of Jesus are probably right in portraying him as a kind of apocalyptic prophet who anticipated that God would soon intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and establish his good kingdom on earth and that people needed to repent in preparation for it. We will also consider the circumstances that led to his death at the hands of the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate.

In Part II of the course, we will move to consider the Book of Acts—the earliest surviving history of the early Christian movement—then the 21 epistles of the New Testament. Because 13 of these epistles claim to be written by the apostle Paul, we will spend some time trying to understand his life and theology. Paul was a Jew who converted to faith in Jesus after being a persecutor of the church. His letters are addressed to churches that he had founded, principally among Gentiles. In them, he spells out his convictions that a person can be made right with God only through the death and resurrection of Jesus (not, for example, through the Jewish Law) and draws numerous ethical and theological implications. Following our discussion of Paul’s own letters, we will devote a lecture to considering the



Corel Stock Photo Library.

relationship of Paul and Jesus, to see whether, as some people have claimed, Paul transformed the religion *of* Jesus into a religion *about* Jesus.

We will then consider other New Testament books that claim Paul as their author that modern scholars have concluded are, in fact, pseudonymous. Finally, we will move into a discussion of the remaining writings of the New Testament, including the books of 1 Peter and Hebrews and ending with a discussion of the book of Revelation, a book that continues to fascinate and intrigue modern readers. We will see that it, like all the other books of the New Testament, is best understood when situated in its own historical context—rather than taken out of context.

In short, this will be a historical introduction to the 27 books of the New Testament. The course will try to address such significant questions as who wrote these books, under what circumstances, and for what audience; we will consider what the books of the New Testament say, what they mean, and how historically accurate they are. Our ultimate goal is to come to a fuller appreciation and understanding of these books that have made such an enormous impact on the history of Western civilization and that continue to play such an important role for people today. ■

The Early Christians and Their Literature

Lecture 1

There can be no question that the Christian church since the 4th century has been the most significant social, economic, political, and cultural force in Western civilization. And the foundation of the church was and is the New Testament.

The New Testament continues to be a field of ongoing fascination, not just for Christian theologians, pastors, and believers, but also for professional historians and lay people interested in classics, history, and literature. Virtually all modern historians would agree that the New Testament has been the most significant book, or group of books, in the history of Western civilization. It continues to be an object of reverence and inspiration for millions of Christians today, a book that governs peoples' personal lives, shapes their religious views, and gives them a sense of hope. The New Testament also plays an enormous role in our political and social lives. The meaning of the book is not self-evident. The differenced interpretation are not just related to geography, culture, and history—they are also related to different understandings of the New Testament.

There are a number of ways we could approach the New Testament in this course. We could approach it from the perspective of the faithful believer. This is how most people who read the New Testament approach the subject. There are other equally valid ways of approaching the New Testament that do not require either that we all should agree about religion or even that we should agree to believe or disbelieve in the New Testament itself. It is possible to study the book from this cultural perspective of one interested in the development of Western civilization. There can be little question that this book stands at the foundation of Western civilization as we know it. Whatever you happen to think about the New Testament, there can be no question that the Christian church has, since the 4th century, been the most significant social, economic, political, and cultural force in Western civilization. And the foundation of the Church was and is the New Testament. We could study how it has played such a huge role in Western art or English literature.

Another way to approach this study is one that is directly concerned with understanding the New Testament in its own historical context. This is the perspective we will take in this course. To approach the New Testament from this historical perspective means suspending our own belief or disbelief in its teachings. We will work to understand how the 27 books that make up the New Testament came into being, to see who wrote them and why, and to determine what they might have meant to their original readers.

We need to consider several important pieces of background information on the New Testament in this first lecture, before plunging into our study. The New Testament comprises 27 books written by Christians of the 1st century, many of whom were said to be apostles of Jesus. The first to be written were produced about 20 years after Jesus' death; the latest, probably 70 years after. All of these books were originally written in Greek (not Hebrew or Aramaic, as many people think).

The 27 books of the New Testament are organized into four major groups. First are the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These are the books that describe the birth, life, activities, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Virtually all of the stories that you've ever heard about Jesus come from these books. These books, then, narrate the *beginnings* of Christianity.

The second division of the New Testament consists of only one book, the Book of Acts (or the Acts of the Apostles). This is a historical account of the activities of Jesus' apostles and missionaries after his death. It is concerned, then, with the *spread* of Christianity.

The third part of the New Testament contains 21 epistles, 13 of which are ascribed to the apostle Paul, the others to others of the apostles. These are actual letters written by Christian authors to other Christian individuals or communities, instructing them in what to believe and how to act. These focus, then, on the *beliefs and ethics* of Christianity.

The final part of the New Testament consists of a single book, the apocalyptic Book of Revelation. This is a description of the end times, when God brings all his promises to fulfillment by destroying this world and bringing in a

utopian kingdom. In contrast to the other portions of the New Testament, then, this book deals with the *culmination* of Christianity.

The 27 books of the New Testament were not the only ones written by the early Christians, but they were the ones that Christians of later times opted to include in their sacred canon. The decisions about which books to include did not come right away; throughout the 2nd and 3rd centuries, Christian leaders debated which books were to be accepted as canonical. There were other gospels, acts, epistles, and so on recording Jesus' words and deeds that are not in the canon. For example, the Gospel of Thomas seems to be in the Gnostic tradition. The Gospel of Peter contains an account of the Resurrection. It was not until the end of the 4th century A.D. that anyone came up with a list of New Testament books that corresponds exactly with our list of 27. This was in a letter written by Athanasius, an influential and powerful bishop of Alexandria, Egypt. The letter was meant to set the date of Easter that year (A.D. 367) and contained other pieces of pastoral advice, including which books should be included in the Scriptures.

The 27 books of the New Testament were not the only ones written by the early Christians.

The debates over which books to include involved a number of criteria. A book had to have been written by one of Jesus' apostles or a close companion of an apostle. In other words, it had to be very ancient, close to the time of Jesus. A book must have been widely read among the Christian churches throughout the world. Its teachings must coincide with those of the church at large; i.e., they had to be orthodox.

The question about whether the Christians who formulated the canon were right about their decisions is a historical one, not a theological one. Historians can appeal to evidence that we now have to decide such matters. For now, though, I want to stress that we will address this and all the other questions raised in this course strictly from a historical point of view, not a religious one. I will not try to promote belief or disbelief in these books. Instead, I will discuss what these books say, what their perspectives are, who wrote them, in what circumstances, to what audience, and for what reasons. These are

historical questions. They may have implications for religious belief, but we will try to deal with them by looking at historical evidence. That will be the goal of the course: a historical introduction to the New Testament, a work of major religious, cultural, and historical significance that deserves our careful attention. ■

Essential Reading

Brown, *The New Testament*, chap. 1.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 1.

Supplemental Reading

Gamble, *The New Testament Canon*.

Questions to Consider

1. Most people think of the New Testament as a religious book, the Christian sacred Scriptures. What reasons might people have for studying the New Testament if they are not religiously committed to it? How would a historical approach to the New Testament differ from a religious or theological approach?
2. What were the grounds adduced for including some books but not others in the New Testament? How, in your opinion, would modern-day understanding of the Bible be affected if some of these decisions were now called into question?

The Greco-Roman Context

Lecture 2

Since context determines the meaning of all of our words and our actions, we need to ask what the context of a historical document was if we are going to understand it.

To begin our study of the New Testament, we must first place it in its own historical context. If we don't know the context of a work, we take it out of context. And if we take it out of context, we change its meaning. This is one of the reasons so many people have so many disputes about the meaning of the New Testament. I can show the importance of context for understanding using two illustrations. The context of a word or group of words is always crucial for interpretation. What would it mean, for example, if I said, "I love this course"? Well, it would depend on where I am, what I am doing, and what the word *course* means (course of a meal, golf course, college course) or how I inflect the word *love*. The same is true of everything in our existence, not just words, but also actions and even gestures. Because context determines the meaning of all our words and actions, we need to ask what the context was in which Jesus lived and the books of the New Testament were written.

Scholars usually refer to the religions of the New Testament world as Greco-Roman cults, commonly called *paganism*. I can begin our study by defining two key terms and providing some historical background. When scholars use the term *Greco-Roman world*, they are referring to the lands around the Mediterranean from roughly the time of Alexander the Great, c. 300 B.C., to the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, c. A.D. 300. Alexander (356 B.C.–323 B.C.) was the great world military genius who conquered most of the Mediterranean, from his native land Macedonia to the Near East, including Egypt, Palestine, and Persia. As he conquered, he spread Greek religion and culture (learned from his tutor, Aristotle), so that by the time of the New Testament, nearly 300 years later, most of the highly educated elite throughout the Mediterranean spoke Greek, in addition to their native languages. The New Testament, as already pointed out, was originally written in Greek. The Greek word for Greece is *hellas*. The *Hellenistic*

world is, therefore, the world that adopted Greek culture in the wake of Alexander's conquests.

The Romans eventually conquered most of these lands a couple of centuries after Alexander. Palestine (modern-day Israel) was under Roman control during the time of the New Testament. Jesus himself was born during the reign of the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus, himself a conqueror who brought peace to the Mediterranean area after years of social strife. Caesar Augustus, also known as Octavius, was a great general who overcame the internal divisions and social strife in Rome and had himself proclaimed its emperor. This began a long period characterized, for the most part, by internal peace and prosperity in the confines of the Roman world, which eventually stretched all the way from England to Syria and included North Africa and Egypt. The countries throughout the area were brought under Roman rule and forced to pay tribute to Rome in exchange for services rendered; Roman troops guarded the borders on the frontiers. Augustus thus inaugurated the *Pax Romana* (the "Roman Peace"), which was to last for about 200 years. The Roman world enjoyed a common language, coinage, and law and had a good road system and other benefits of civilization. These factors helped the spread of Christianity.



Corel Stock Photo Library.

The Empire did not convert to Christianity for several

Beginning with the rule of Caesar Augustus, Rome began a long period characterized by internal peace and prosperity.

centuries. The first Christian emperor was Constantine, who lived in the 4th century A.D. Before that time, virtually everyone—except for the Jews and the small group of Christians—adhered to local and state religions, or cults. These people—non-Jews and non-Christians—are often called *pagans* by modern scholars. Note that this term does not have derogatory connotations in this context. A *pagan* was simply someone who subscribed to any of the polytheistic religions found throughout the empire. These religions are called *cults* not because they were dangerous and marginalized; the word *cult* is simply an abbreviated form of the term *cultus deorum*, Latin for “care of the gods” (just as *agriculture* is “care of the fields”). These religions were concerned with caring for the gods so that the gods would, in exchange, care for the people.

For many people today, only one religion can be “true.”

Most ancient people didn’t see it this way at all.

One way to understand the religious cults scattered throughout the Empire is to contrast them with what we think of as religion today. For most people today, it only makes sense that there is only one God. For most ancient people this didn’t make sense at all; in fact it was nonsense. People throughout antiquity were polytheists, believing in many gods. There were, of course, the “Great gods,” known to us through ancient mythology—Greek gods, such as Zeus, Ares, and Aphrodite, or their Roman equivalents, Jupiter, Mars, and Venus. There were also numerous local gods who protected and cared for cities, towns, and villages; even less powerful gods who were localized in forests, rivers, and roads; family gods who cared for the home; gods who oversaw every human function and activity—the crops, the cupboard, the hearth, personal health, childbirth, and so on.

For many people today, only one religion can be “true.” Most ancient people didn’t see it this way at all. Because there were lots of gods, there was no reason to think that one was better for everyone than any other or that only one was to be worshipped and praised. They were all gods, so they all deserved to be worshipped. For this reason, the religions of the Greco-Roman world were far more tolerant of one another than most religions of our world today. Following one religion did not prevent you from following any other as well.

You could worship as many gods as you chose. Everyone was expected to worship the state gods. These gods had made the Roman Empire great and, of course, they deserved to be worshipped. Not to do so was to oppose the state they had created, which was a political offense. These gods were often worshipped at major state festivals, which were eagerly awaited and enjoyed as vacations from work to be spent feasting and drinking with family and friends. The Christians, of course, refused to participate in these forms of pagan worship, which ultimately is why they came to be persecuted.

For most people today, religion is a matter of constant attention, thought, and devotion. It is a daily routine. For most ancient people, religion was a periodic matter. The gods did not demand constant devotion, just sacrifices at set times in the calendar and on other occasions as the need arose. There was no sense that one had to engage in daily devotion. In fact, for the most part, the gods were completely uninterested in how one lived one's daily life. Ancient people were concerned with ethical behavior, but the gods weren't. Ethics was, therefore, a matter of philosophy, not religion. Very few ethical activities were considered relevant to religion. Religion was almost exclusively a matter of ritual performances of sacrifice and prayer.

For most people today, it only makes sense that religion is a matter of proper belief. Oddly enough, most ancient people didn't see it that way. Odd as it might seem to us today, it didn't much matter to the ancients what you *believed* about the gods—only how you worshipped them through cultic acts. There weren't set doctrines to be believed, sacred books to study, or creeds to recite. As a result, there was no such thing as a heretic, or false believer, in these religions. You either practiced the religions or you didn't.

Religion is also a question of securing the afterlife for people today. Most ancient people, as it turns out, didn't believe in the afterlife. For them, religion was a question of securing the favor of the gods in the here and now. When life is lived close to the edge, and you can't really control major factors in your life—such as warfare, health, rain, and crops—then you need help from someone who *can* control them. The gods can and do. By worshipping the gods, you convince them to help you win your battles, secure the love of a particular woman, keep healthy, and grow your crops.

For many people today, God is far beyond humans in every way; most ancient people did not conceive of the divine realm as completely separated from the human by an unbridgeable chasm. There was a hierarchy among the gods themselves, a kind of divine pyramid, with the most powerful god at the top, the state gods below him, various local gods below them, family gods still further down, and so on. The more powerful gods were also more remote. Near the bottom of this divine pyramid were beings who were much more powerful than us, but much less powerful than the full gods. These were people that we might call divine men—humans who were born to the union of a god and a mortal—who were either more powerful than the rest of us, like Hercules, or more awe-inspiring, like the Emperor Augustus, or more wise, like the Greek philosopher Plato. There were stories, in fact, of divine men who were miraculously born, who could perform such divine miracles as healing the sick and raising the dead, who delivered divine teachings to their followers, and who at the end of their lives ascended to heaven to live among the gods forever (e.g., Apollonius of Tyana). This may sound familiar, because there are stories in the New Testament of Jesus doing all these things. For us today, these stories are completely unique, unlike anything else in our experience. For people in the Greco-Roman world, though, these stories would have made perfect sense. The existence of such divine men was widely recognized throughout their context. ■

Essential Reading

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 2.

Supplemental Reading

Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*.

Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History*.

Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*.

Questions to Consider

1. Explain why “context” is so important for meaning. Think of some examples from your own experience in which a misunderstanding occurred because somebody took a word or action out of context.
2. Summarize the most important ways that religion in the Greco-Roman world was so different from what most people today think of as ‘religion.’ How can “common sense” in one context seem to be “non-sense” in another?

Ancient Judaism

Lecture 3

The first distinctive aspect of Judaism was they were monotheists. Second of all, Jews believed that this one God, the creator of all, had made a covenant with his people.

In the last lecture, we saw that we must place the New Testament in its own historical context to understand it. Ancient Judaism is an important part of that context. Even though ancient Judaism is sometimes portrayed, even by scholars, as being completely unlike any other religion in its environment, a moment's thought shows that cannot have been the case. If it were completely different, no one could have recognized it as a religion. Imagine how you would describe an Austin-Healy Sprite to someone who had never seen one before or who didn't know what a sports car was—or even a car. In fact, Judaism had a number of points of contact, or broad points of similarity, with other religions of the Greco-Roman world. Like pagans, the Jews believed in a divine realm, inhabited by one supreme God but also by other divine beings of less power, beings such as angels, archangels, and demons. Like pagans, Jews had sacred places devoted to their worship of this god, where sacrifices could be made and prayers recited. Like pagans, Jews saw worship as principally involving cultic acts—animal sacrifices and prayers in accordance with ancient tradition—meant to propitiate God and demonstrate devotion. Like pagans, most Jews were more concerned with life in the present than in life after death. God was the God of this world, and he was concerned about how his people lived in it.

At the same time, there were significant differences between Jews and everyone else in the Greco-Roman world. To understand Judaism more fully, we should talk about these areas of distinctiveness. Possibly the most distinctive feature of ancient Judaism, in contrast to the various forms of paganism, is that it was monotheistic. Some pagans, as we've seen, thought there was one God who was above all others, but Jews took this even further. There was only one true God who was to be worshipped and served; this was the God who had created the universe. He was more powerful than all the other gods which were widely thought to exist, even among Jews.

He was not the god of a particular locality, even though originally he may have started out as the local deity of the land of Judah. He was so holy, so distinct from everything else, that not even his name could be pronounced. Jews, therefore, spelled his name in a way that could not be pronounced (the *tetragrammaton*; i.e., the “four letters” that were God’s personal name). He was the only one that was to be worshipped.

Jews believed that this one God had made a covenant—a treaty or a pact—with the ancestors of the Jewish people. He had agreed to protect and honor them, so long as they agreed to worship him and behave as he instructed them. This covenant was first made with the father of the Jews, Abraham. It was confirmed under Moses, the great Savior of Israel. After Moses led the Exodus out of Egypt, God gave him his Law on Mount Sinai. The Law of Moses, in other words, represented the obligation of the Jews to God, governed by the covenant.

This Law came to be embedded in writings, particularly the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Torah. These books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy,) as a group are sometimes also known as the Pentateuch, a word that means “the five scrolls.” In the modern world, Christians have sometimes misunderstood the importance of the Law in Judaism. It was never meant to be an undoable list of dos and don’ts that Jews had to keep (even though they were unable to) in order to have salvation. Instead, the Law was seen as the greatest gift God had ever given to humans—his own direction on how to worship him and live together. Following the Law was the greatest joy, because doing so meant yielding oneself to the all-powerful and loving God who ruled the universe and called his people out of slavery. Following the Law was not a *requirement* for salvation, it was a *response* to salvation. Included in the Law, of course, were the Ten Commandments, and laws that were designed to make Jews distinct from other peoples. For example, Jews were to circumcise their baby boys;

Early Judaism was not a monolith, any more than today’s Christianity is a monolith. In fact, there were many kinds of Jews in the 1st century who believed different things and practiced their religion differently.

they were not to work on the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week; and they were to observe kosher food laws, not eating, for example, pork or shrimp.

One other distinctive feature of ancient Judaism involved its places of worship, especially the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the one and only Temple, a glorious place in the days of Jesus. It was large enough to encompass 25 football fields and it was expensive: Parts of it were overlaid with gold. It was the only place in Judaism where animal sacrifices could be offered to God. Because animal sacrifices were so much a part of the religion, the Temple was a central place for all Jewish worship. It was located in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea. Jews would flock from all over the world to worship at the Temple.

Most Jews in the 1st century, though, did not live anywhere near Jerusalem but had scattered throughout the Mediterranean at different periods of foreign conquest. Because the Temple was so remote for most Jews, the practice of having local places of worship, called *synagogues* (from the



Corel Stock Photo Library.

In 1947, a library of religious scrolls for an Essene community were discovered in the Qumran Caves.

Greek term meaning “gathering together”), had developed by the time of the New Testament.

Early Judaism was not a monolith, any more than today’s Christianity is a monolith. In fact, there were many kinds of Jews in the 1st century who believed different things and practiced their religion differently. One way to illustrate the variety of early Judaism is to talk about four of the major groups that we know about from the time of Jesus. These were the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and the Fourth Philosophy. Not every Jew belonged to one of these groups. These aren’t like Christian denominations (almost all Christians belong on one level to one or another) but like local civic organizations (the Elks, the Chambers of Commerce, the Rotary clubs; some people belong to them but most don’t). They are useful to examine, though, because they reveal some aspects of early Jewish diversity.

The best known group was the Pharisees, who contrary to modern misperception, were not professional hypocrites. They were a committed group of Jews who believed in following God’s law, as revealed in the Torah, absolutely as far as possible, and who devised certain “oral” laws (as opposed to the written—and sometimes ambiguous—Law of Moses) to help them do so. These oral laws and debates about them eventually came to be written down by later rabbis, or Jewish teachers, about 200 years after Jesus, in the book called the *Mishnah*, the heart of the very large collection of Jewish lore and learning called the Talmud. In short, in their religious outlook, the Pharisees stressed the Law.

The Pharisees were sometimes opposed by the Sadducees, who did not subscribe to the oral Law. We are not well informed about the Sadducees, because none of them left us any writings. It appears, though, that the Sadducees were made up of the upper-class aristocracy of the Jews. Many of them were priests in the Jewish temple and served as the liaison with the ruling power, the Romans. In their religious outlook, the Sadducees stressed the Temple and the need to perform the sacrifices to God as prescribed in the Law.

The Essenes were a group of highly religious Jews who believed that the rest of the people of Israel had fallen away from God and had, therefore,

become impure. Essenes worked to preserve their own purity, apart from the impurity of those around them. Occasionally, they founded their own monastic communities where they could live together and worship God. One such community was at a place called Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls, a library of an Essene community, were discovered in 1947. In their religious outlook, the Essenes stressed the need to maintain their own purity in view of the fact that the world as we know it was soon going to come to a crashing halt, when God intervened in history and overthrew the forces of evil (which included most of the other Jews).

Another group of Jews is sometimes called, simply, the Fourth Philosophy. This group comprises a number of groups of Jews who believed that God had given them the land of Israel and that it should be taken back by force from those who currently ruled it.

One kind of ancient Jewish perspective has proved particularly important for understanding the historical Jesus and the New Testament: Jewish apocalypticism. We know about this particular world view from a number of sources, including the biblical book of Daniel; some non-biblical Jewish books from the time; including the book of 1 Enoch; and the Dead Sea Scrolls. This was a widespread form of Jewish belief, held to, for example, by various thinkers among the Pharisees and the Essenes. The major tenets of this form of Judaism were as follows: (1) Apocalypticists held to a dualistic view of the world. There are two fundamental forces of reality, the forces of good and evil. History itself was seen dualistically. We are now living in the evil age, but there is a good age that is yet to come. (2) Apocalypticists were pessimists, to the extent that they thought life in this world could not be improved by human effort. The forces of evil were in control and were going to make life worse and worse. (3) But there was a day of reckoning coming, in which God would judge this world and overthrow the forces of evil. (4) This coming judgment of God was imminent. In the words of one prominent Jewish apocalypticist: "Truly I tell you, some of you standing here will not taste death until they see that the Kingdom of God has come in power." These are the words of Jesus, one of the best known Jewish apocalypticists from the ancient world. ■

Essential Reading

Cohen, *From the Maccabbees to the Mishnah*.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 2.

Supplemental Reading

Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief*.

Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings*.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways was ancient Judaism like and unlike Christianity as practiced in the modern world?
2. Summarize the major tenets of Jewish apocalypticism. Are there any major religious groups in the modern world that seem to embrace a similar point of view?

The Earliest Traditions About Jesus

Lecture 4

Are [the Gospels] historically accurate biographies of Jesus written by people who saw him do the things that he did, or are they filled with legends and myths? Are they well-intentioned fictions created by his well-intentioned followers? Are they fact, fiction, or a combination of both?

To this point in the course, we've examined the background of Jesus and the New Testament, focusing on the religions of the Greco-Roman world and, in particular, early Judaism. With this lecture, we'll move on to the New Testament itself, beginning with the first four books of the New Testament, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Before plunging into these texts, though, we should make some initial inquiries into what kind of books these are. Are they historically accurate biographies of Jesus written by people who saw him do the things he did? Are they filled with legends and myths? Are they well-intentioned fictions created by his well-intentioned followers? Are they fact, fiction, or a combination of both?

One way to begin is by discussing some significant historical data—the dates of the Gospels in relationship to the events that they narrate. Virtually everyone agrees that Jesus died sometime around the year 30 A.D. Moreover, for a variety of reasons that we don't need to go into here, almost all scholars of every persuasion agree on the approximate dates of the Gospels. Mark was probably the first to be written, c. 65–70 A.D.; Matthew and Luke were probably next, c. 80–85 A.D.; and John was probably last, c. 90–95 A.D. What scholars don't always agree on is the significance of these dates. For our purposes here, I want us to consider the time gap between the death of Jesus and the first accounts of his life. The gap is 35 to 65 years, which is significant for understanding the character of these earliest accounts. This would be akin to writing the first accounts of the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson at the turn of the 21st century—with no written sources from the time.

It is important to understand what was happening during all those years. For the New Testament, the most important events during those years involved the spread of the Christian church. Christianity started, immediately after Jesus' death, with a handful of his followers, perhaps only 20 or so. Within 40 or 50 years, however, this tiny band of disciples had multiplied themselves many times over and spread the new religion based on Jesus in major urban areas throughout the Mediterranean. In this age before the possibilities and problems created by mass media, Christians necessarily propagated the religion by word of mouth. Obviously, the stories about Jesus changed, given the fact that they were being told in different languages in different places. As we will see, there is historical evidence that the stories did change in many ways.

There are some standard objections to the idea that the stories about Jesus changed as they circulated by word of mouth throughout the empire. Many people—perhaps somewhat unreflectively—assume that the stories couldn't have been changed in such a relatively short time, especially when eyewitnesses were around to verify the accounts. But stories *can* change overnight (as anyone who has ever been in the news can readily attest), and eyewitnesses often disagree among themselves about crucial points concerning an event (cf., testimony in a court case). Finally, almost no one who was telling these stories could have checked with eyewitnesses, even if had they wanted to, in this world before e-mail, the Internet, the telephone, the telegraph, or even the Pony Express.

The most common objection is that people living in oral cultures had better memories than most of us and could be counted on to tell stories exactly as they heard them, time after time, without changing them in the least. Unfortunately for this view, anthropological studies of the past 20 years have shown convincingly that this isn't the case at all. In fact, the concern for verbal accuracy that is behind this theory is a concern found exclusively in written cultures where accounts can be checked to see if they are consistent. In oral cultures, the natural assumption is that stories *are* to be changed, depending on the audience and the situation.

In fact, as scholars have long known, the question about authorship of the Gospels is not that simple. All four books were written anonymously. They

were not ascribed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John until some time in the 2nd century A.D., decades after they were written. There are good reasons for doubting that these traditional ascriptions are accurate. Even though Jesus and his own disciples spoke Aramaic, these books are written in Greek. Jesus' own disciples, at least according to the New Testament accounts, were mostly lower-class, uneducated peasants (according to Acts 4:13, both Peter and John were known to be illiterate); the Gospel writers were highly educated and literate. All of the books are written in the third person, making no direct references to the authors' own involvement with Jesus. The books were later ascribed to apostles by Christians interested in securing their authority as Scripture. But these traditional ascriptions are late and questionable.

Who, then, were the authors? We can't really say, except that they were relatively highly educated and literate Greek-speaking Christians

who lived several decades after Jesus. The authors had heard numerous reports about Jesus' life that were passed down year after year among his followers and wrote some of these reports down. If this is so, then it seems likely that the Gospel accounts themselves preserve traditions that have been changed over time. Is there any evidence for this view or is it pure conjecture?

The evidence for this view is preserved in the Gospels themselves. Sometimes the Gospels tell the same story, so we can compare the stories to see if they are consistent. If not, then obviously someone has changed the story. This can be illustrated with just a single extended example, which involves a very simple question: When did Jesus die? Each of the Gospels, of course, narrates the events surrounding Jesus' death, and two of them, our earliest Gospel, Mark, and our latest, John, provide a precise dating of the event. All four Gospels indicate that Jesus died during the Feast of the Passover, the annual festival celebrated in Jerusalem to commemorate the events of the

Although it is undoubtedly true that the Gospels of the New Testament contain stories about Jesus that are historically accurate, other stories appear to have been modified by Christians in the process of retelling.

Exodus. The festival had as its background the stories of God's deliverance of his people Israel from their slavery in Egypt through Moses, as recorded in the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible. In the 1st century, Jews would come from all over the world to Jerusalem for this feast and would purchase a lamb to be eaten at the celebratory meal. The lambs were sacrificed in the Temple on the afternoon before the Passover meal was eaten. That day was called the "Day of Preparation for the Passover." The lambs were taken home to be prepared for the meal, which was then eaten after it got dark—that is, on the day of Passover itself. It's important to recall that in Jewish reckoning, a new day begins, not at midnight, as for us, but whenever it gets dark. (That's why the Jewish Sabbath begins, even today, on Friday evening at dark and continues through Saturday, until it gets dark again.)

In the earliest account of Jesus' last days, found in Mark, the sequence of events is clearly laid out. The day before his arrest, Jesus' disciples ask him where they are to prepare the Passover meal (Mark 14:12). He gives them their instructions. That night they have the meal, during which Jesus instills the symbolic foods with new significance. ("This is my body," he says over the bread, and "This is the cup of the new covenant in my blood," he says over the cup.) Afterward, Jesus goes out to pray, is betrayed by Judas Iscariot, is handed over to the Jewish authorities for trial, and spends the night in jail. The next morning—i.e., the morning of Passover, the day after the lambs were slain—he appears before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who finds him guilty of criminal charges and orders him executed. Jesus is immediately taken off and crucified at 9:00 a.m.

Our last Gospel of the New Testament, John, has a sequence of events that is in many ways similar but contains some striking differences. Here, too, Jesus has a last meal with his disciples, but there's no word of it being a Passover meal. The disciples, in this Gospel, never ask where they are to prepare Passover, and Jesus does not speak about the symbolic foods in a new way. Again, after supper, he goes out to pray, is betrayed by Judas, is arrested, and spends the night in jail. The next day he appears before Pilate and is ordered to be executed. We're told exactly when this happened in John 19:14: "And this was on the Day of Preparation for the Passover, at 12:00 noon." But how could it be the Day of Preparation for the Passover? According to Mark, Jesus lived through that day, had the Passover meal with

his disciples that night, and was put on the cross the next morning, on the day of Passover itself. In John's Gospel, though, Jesus was executed before the Passover meal even began.

How does one reconcile this discrepancy? It probably cannot be reconciled literally. It is worth noting that the Gospel of John, which has Jesus die on the afternoon of the day before the Passover (the Day of Preparation), precisely when the lambs were being slaughtered, is the only Gospel of the New Testament that explicitly identifies Jesus himself as "the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29, 36). Is it possible that John has changed historical data to make a theological point, that he's changed the day and hour of Jesus' death precisely to show that Jesus really was the Lamb, who was slain on the same day and at the same hour (and at the hands of the same people—the chief priests!) as the Passover lamb?

These kinds of changes in the accounts of Jesus' life appear throughout the pages of the New Testament Gospels. Changes can be seen, for example, in the accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke. Both Gospels record incidents that later were combined into the well-known "Christmas" story. But the Gospels are at odds on a number of points: Did Joseph and Mary originally live in Bethlehem, as in Matthew, or in Nazareth, as in Luke? Were they in Bethlehem just for a temporary visit or was that their home? Did they return to Nazareth a few weeks after Jesus was born or stay in Bethlehem for a long time, until the "wise men" appeared? Did they flee to Egypt or head back north to Nazareth?

In short, although it is undoubtedly true that the Gospels of the New Testament contain stories about Jesus that are historically accurate, other stories appear to have been modified by Christians in the process of retelling. Part of our task, later in this course, will be to decide which accounts can be accepted as historically accurate and which ones cannot. For the time being, we will bracket the question of their historical accuracy and examine each Gospel as a piece of literature—seeing what it has to say about Jesus and trying to understand how he is portrayed theologically by those who told the stories about him. ■

Essential Reading

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 3.

Questions to Consider

1. Which arguments strike you as the strongest that early Christians modified their traditions about Jesus? What kind of counter-arguments might someone adduce?
2. Does it matter to you if the accounts of the New Testament are historically accurate? Why or why not?
3. If Christians modified the traditions about Jesus that have come down to us in the New Testament, how do you suppose we might get behind their modifications to see what Jesus really said and did?

Mark—Jesus the Suffering Son of God

Lecture 5

This book was written not simply to recount events from Jesus' life, but to explain to the readers who Jesus really was and why his death mattered.

As we begin our discussion of the individual Gospels as literary portrayals of Jesus, it will be important to consider the distinctive features of each. There is not just *one* Gospel, but four. Each of the four has a distinctive emphasis. If you conflate the four into one, you destroy the distinctive meaning of each. An illustration is seen in the two accounts of Jesus' death provided in Mark and Luke. In Mark, Jesus is portrayed as distraught, abandoned, forsaken, but in Luke, he is portrayed as calm and in complete control. Combining the two into a solitary account disrupts the emphasis of each and creates only a confused account (in this regard, consider the “seven last words of Jesus,” drawn from the different accounts). Throughout our study, when we consider each of the Gospels, we will do so on its *own* terms, without appealing to the portrayal of one Gospel to explain what is meant in another.

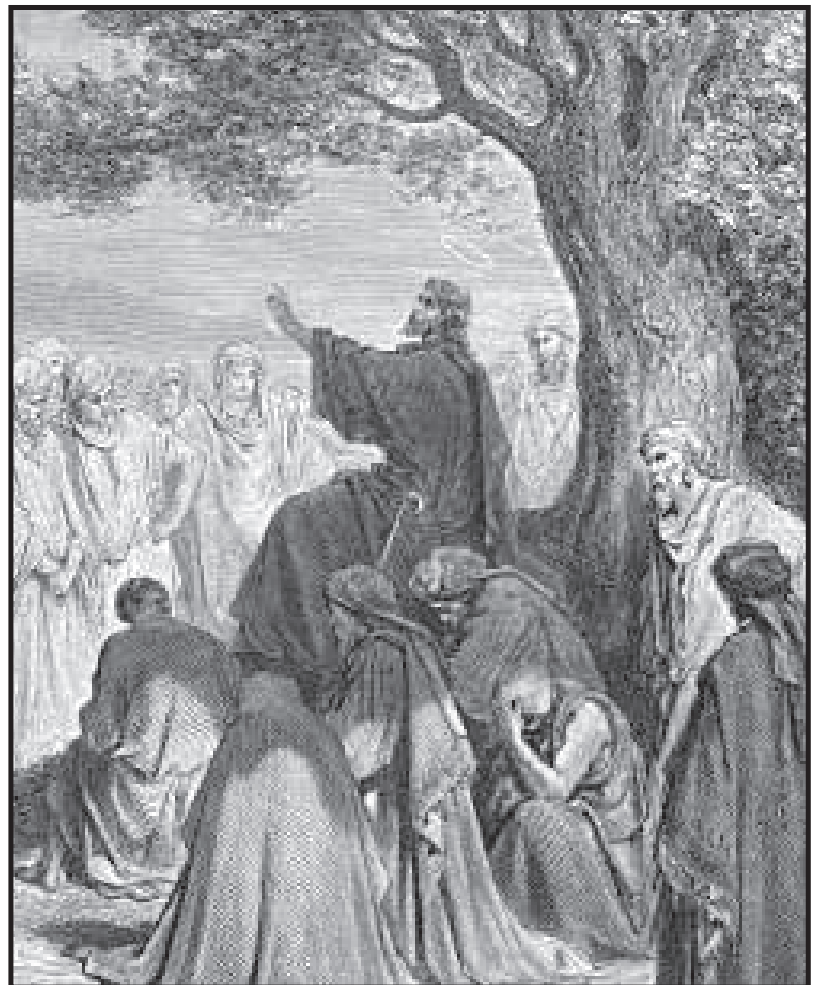
We begin with the first Gospel to be written, that of Mark. It is attributed in Christian tradition to John Mark, the personal secretary of the apostle Peter. We don't know, however, who its author actually was—except to say that he was a relatively highly educated Greek-speaking Christian who was writing some 35 to 40 years after the events that he narrates. This author appears to have heard stories about Jesus that had been in circulation for some time, then wrote a number of them down—no doubt putting his own “spin” on who Jesus really was. We may continue to call him “Mark” for the sake of convenience.

Mark begins his account by calling his book a “Gospel” (1:1). The term *Gospel* means “good news.” Thus, by using this title, Mark doesn't claim to be writing a historically accurate biography in the modern sense, but an account of Jesus that reveals how his life and death brings “good news” to those willing to receive it. In particular, as we will see, the book was written

not simply to recount events from Jesus' life, but also to explain to the readers who he was and why his death mattered.

Mark sets a tall order for himself at the very outset of his Gospel by his initial description of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). These designations may not seem surprising to us, because Christians today naturally think of Jesus as the “Christ.” But for people in Mark's world, this description would have seemed rather shocking. The term *Christ* is Greek, and means literally “anointed.” It is, in fact, the exact Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *messiah*. It would have seemed shocking as a description of Jesus in particular, because everyone—Mark, his readers, and just about anyone who knew about Jesus—realized that Jesus had been crucified as a criminal. Jews who were expecting the messiah were expecting a figure of grandeur and power, perhaps a great military leader such as King David or a cosmic figure who would come from heaven in a mighty act of judgment against the forces of evil. As far as we know, there were no Jews before Christianity who thought that the messiah would be a figure who suffered and died. Quite the contrary, the messiah was to overthrow his enemies to bring in God's kingdom. Mark's book is designed to show how Jesus could be the messiah despite the fact—or rather, even more shocking still, *because* of the fact—that Jesus was crucified. For Mark, Jesus was the messiah *because* he suffered and died.

Mark begins his narrative through a series of stories that are meant to demonstrate Jesus'



Jesus preaching to the multitudes.

Dore Bible Illustrations, Courtesy of Dover Pictorial Archive Series.

credentials as the uniquely authoritative Son of God. He is announced by a Jewish prophet, John the Baptist, as the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures (Mark 1:2–3). After he is baptized by John, he goes into the wilderness to do battle with the devil and the wild animals and returns unscathed. He immediately begins his public ministry by acting in ways that reveal his great power. You would think that with all these miracles, people would recognize Jesus for who he is.

But one of the major points of this Gospel—unlike some of the other Gospels—is that no one recognizes Jesus. Consider how people react to him in the first half of the Gospel: His family thinks that he’s gone out of his mind (3:21). The people from his hometown can’t understand what he’s doing, because to them he’s just the carpenter down the street (6:1–6). The leaders of his own people, the Jews, think that he’s

possessed by the Devil (3:22). Most striking of all, his own disciples are explicitly said not to understand who he is (6:51–52; 8:21). Who, then, does know that Jesus is actually the Son of God in this Gospel? When you read the first half of the Gospel carefully, you may be surprised.

Mark’s Gospel was ... written by a Greek-speaking Christian who had inherited a number of traditions about Jesus. This author, though, did not simply repeat these traditions ... Mark’s account is much richer and contains more nuance than that.

When Jesus is baptized, the voice comes from heaven saying, “you are my beloved son” (1:11). God knows who Jesus is and because the voice in this account comes to Jesus (and only to Jesus), it’s clear that Jesus knows. When Jesus casts out demons, they declare him to be the Son of God (3:14). So they know. Obviously Mark knows, because he’s writing these things, and presumably you know, because you’re reading them. But no one else seems to know.

All that changes in the middle of the Gospel, in a sequence of stories that show that some people, at least the disciples, begin to get some kind of an inkling of Jesus’ identity. At almost the midway point of the Gospel comes the most interesting miracle in the entire narrative, an account of a man who

is blind and gradually regains his sight. This account appears to be a symbolic expression of what will happen to the disciples, who gradually come to see who Jesus really is (8:22–26). In the next story, Jesus asks his disciples who they think he is. Peter replies, “You are the Messiah” (8:29). Jesus warns them not to tell anyone. But why? Is it because he’s not the messiah anyone expected? That he’s not the great and powerful figure who will overthrow his enemies? Jesus begins to teach that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Peter rebukes him for saying so (how could the messiah suffer?). And Jesus in turn rebukes Peter, telling him that he doesn’t understand yet the truth about himself (8:31–38). In fact, Jesus *is* the messiah, but he’s the messiah who has to suffer—even if no one else recognizes it. From this point on in the narrative, Jesus regularly predicts that he needs to suffer and die. After each of these predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34), the disciples demonstrate their complete inability to understand. They don’t realize that Jesus is not going to overthrow the Romans; he is going to be crushed by them.

Mark’s Gospel has sometimes been called a “Passion Narrative with a Long Introduction.” In this context the term *passion* refers to the “suffering” of Christ. Fully six of the 16 chapters in the book deal with the final week of Jesus’ life, leading up to his death. After 10 chapters of teaching the multitudes, healing the sick, casting out the demons, and even raising the dead, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover. He spends a week there preaching in the Temple. He then has a last meal with his disciples, after which he is betrayed by Judas, arrested by the authorities, denied by Peter, put on trial before the Jewish leaders and then before the Roman governor Pilate, who condemns him to die on a cross. Next comes the climax of the narrative, Jesus’ death itself. Up until this point, no one seems to understand who Jesus is. Even those like the disciples who appear to have some inkling have still not realized that to be the messiah means to suffer. It seems that, at the end, even Jesus himself is not so sure. He prays three times for God to remove his fate from him (as if the messiah *could* escape suffering). At the end, he is completely silent, as if in shock, until after all his rejection, pain, and suffering, he cries out in despair what I take to be a genuine question: “My God my God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34). He then dies.

Even if Jesus has doubts at the end, though, the reader does not. Mark clearly indicates in the very next two verses what this death was all about (15:38–

39): The curtain in the Temple is torn in half. This was the curtain that stood before the sacred room called the Holy of Holies, a room in which God himself was thought to dwell, in which no one could enter except the high priest, once a year. This curtain that separated God from his people is ripped in half. For Mark, God is now available to his people directly, through the death of Jesus. Somebody finally recognizes who Jesus really is: the pagan centurion who, seeing Jesus die, proclaims, “Truly this man was the Son of God.” For Mark, Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah—not despite the fact that he suffered and died, but precisely *because* he suffered and died.

Jesus’ identity is finally confirmed at the end of the story. Three days later, Jesus’ women followers go to his tomb and find it empty. He has been raised from the dead. In keeping with the theme that Jesus was completely misunderstood, we’re told that the women flee the tomb and don’t tell anyone, because they were afraid.

At this point, we should review the major points we have covered concerning Mark’s Gospel account. Mark’s Gospel was the first to be written, by a Greek-speaking Christian who had inherited a number of traditions about Jesus. This author, though, did not simply repeat these traditions to provide us with historically accurate detail about what Jesus said and did. Mark’s account is much richer and contains more nuance than that. Mark molded his traditions to make his point that Jesus was an unexpected messiah, one whose suffering and death were neither accidental, nor incidental, to his messiah-ship. For Mark, Jesus suffered and died precisely *because* he was the messiah. Moreover, Mark wanted his readers to know that if they expected to follow Jesus, they too must take up their crosses and come after him. ■

Essential Reading

The Gospel of Mark.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 7.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 5.

Supplemental Reading

Hooker, *The Message of Mark*.

Kingsbury, *The Christology of Mark's Gospel*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do people today generally mean by the term *messiah* and how does this contrast with the meanings that were more common in ancient Judaism?
2. Why do you suppose Mark portrays the disciples of Jesus as so ignorant of who he really was?

Matthew—Jesus the Jewish Messiah

Lecture 6

Matthew's gospel begins with a verse, "The book of the generation, or the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham." He begins his gospel by stressing the intimate connection between Jesus and David and Abraham.

We now move on to Matthew, a Gospel widely thought to be the most Jewish in its understanding of Jesus. In many ways, both Matthew and Luke are similar to Mark. In fact, there are entire passages that the three Gospels share, sometimes telling the same stories with the same words. For that reason, scholars have long called these three books the "Synoptic" Gospels. The word synoptic comes from two Greek words that mean "seen together." It's possible to lay these Gospels side by side and see at once how they tell the same story. This will not be the case with John, which tells very few of the same stories as the Synoptic Gospels.

For centuries, scholars have agreed that the Synoptics have so many stories in common because they used the same sources for the information about Jesus. More specifically, it is now generally agreed that Matthew and Luke both had a copy of Mark available to them and that they borrowed many of his stories for their accounts, changing them as they deemed desirable. Matthew and Luke also have a number of other stories in common that are not found in Mark. These are principally sayings of Jesus—for example, the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes. Scholars now generally believe that these stories came from a Gospel document that no longer survives, which they call "Q" (from the German word *quelle*, meaning "source"). The Q source is a hypothetical document that contained the material found in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark. For stories that are unique to either Matthew or Luke, scholars posit the existence of other hypothetical sources simply called M (Matthew's special source—e.g., for the story of the Wise Men) and L (Luke's special source—e.g., for the parable of the Good Samaritan).

Behind the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are four sources (Mark, Q, M, and L). Because it appears that Matthew used Mark

as one of his sources, one of the ways to study his Gospel is to see how it's different (this is termed "redaction criticism"). This Gospel has been traditionally ascribed to Matthew, the disciple of Jesus who was known to be a tax collector; we do not, however, know the author's actual identity. He does not appear to have been an eyewitness to Jesus' life, but rather a Greek-speaking Christian writing around 80–85 A.D., a half century or so after the events that he narrates.

Matthew's Gospel offers a distinctive portrayal of Jesus. On the one hand, as you might expect, Matthew has a similar view to Mark. Here, too, Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God, whose entire life looked forward to his death, which was necessary to bring salvation. But there are different emphases in places, as becomes apparent at the very outset of the Gospel. This Gospel is distinguished by its stress both on the Jewish-ness of Jesus and on his opposition to Judaism as he found it. This Gospel emphasizes, far more than Mark, that Jesus was the Jewish messiah, sent from the Jewish God, to the Jewish people, in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. He gathered Jewish disciples and taught them that they had to follow the Jewish Law. At the same time, Jesus opposed the Jewish teachers of his day and condemned the way they practiced their religion. This combination of a strong affirmation of Judaism as it ought to be and a vitriolic condemnation of Judaism as it is actually practiced makes Matthew's portrayal of Judaism so distinctive.

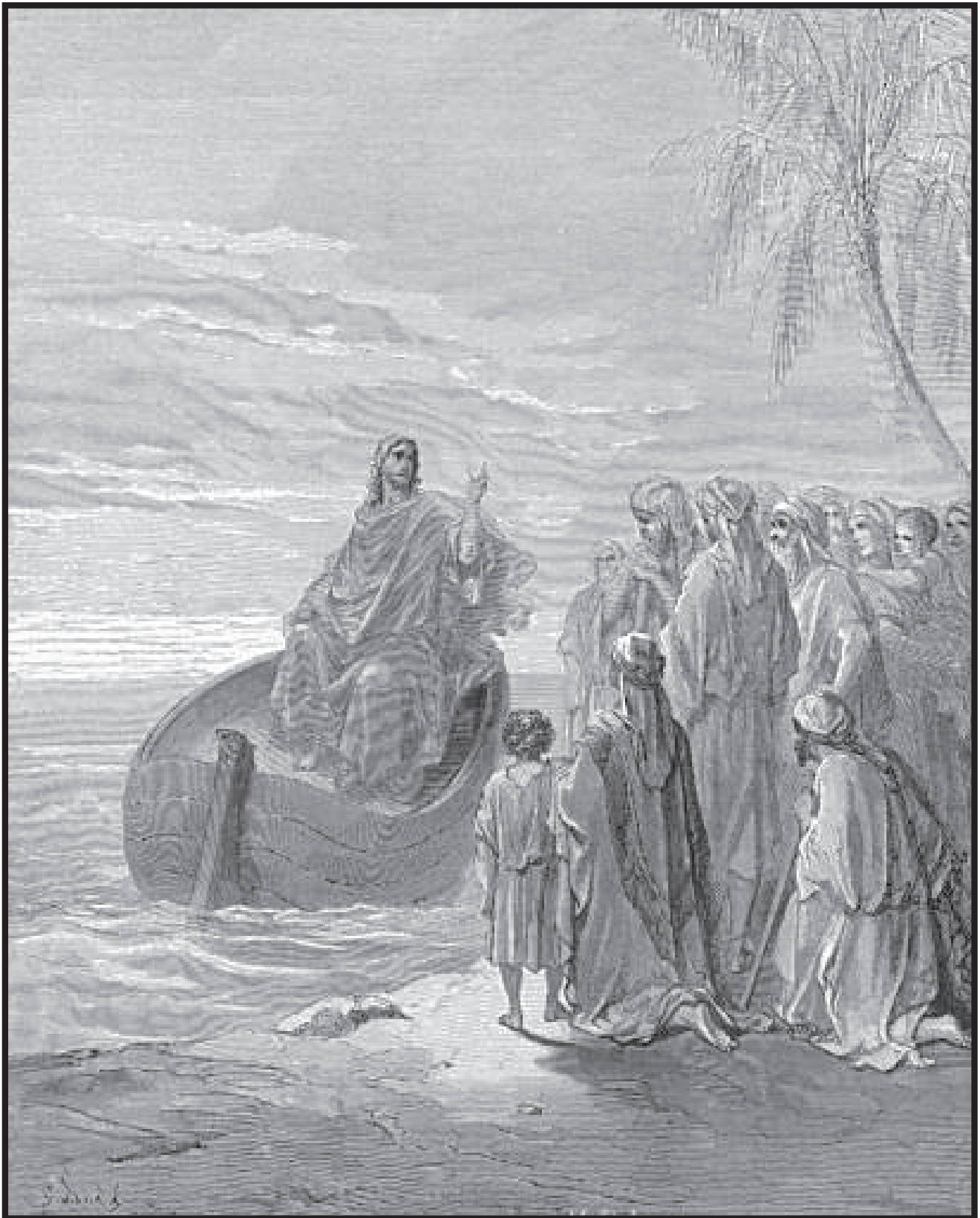
Matthew's emphasis on Jesus' own Jewish-ness can be seen in passages found in Matthew that are not found in his earlier source, Mark. It is important to stress the methodological point. By adding stories to the account of Mark that he had in front of him, Matthew has altered somewhat the overarching perspective. Matthew begins his Gospel not with the baptism of Jesus, as in Mark, but with a genealogy that traces his line of descent. The very first verse intimates the stress of this Gospel: Jesus descends from Abraham, the father of the Jews, and David, the great King of the Jews, whose descendant, commonly called the Son of David, was to be the messiah. The genealogy itself establishes Jesus' credentials as standing in the messianic line and does so in a striking way. Matthew has organized "who begat whom" into three sets of 14 generations: 14 from the father of Israel, Abraham, to the King of Israel, David; 14 from the King of Israel to the destruction of Israel by the Babylonians; and 14 from the destruction of Israel to the messiah of Israel—

Jesus. This sounds almost too good to be true, as if divine providence has itself decided when the messiah must come and Jesus appears just at the right moment. The problem, though, is that to make the sequence of three sets of 14 work, Matthew has had to do some creative editing. A comparison with the Hebrew Bible shows that he has dropped some names out of the genealogy—e.g., in v. 8, Matthew says that Joram was the father of Uzziah, when in fact, he was his great-great-grandfather. Why would Matthew change the genealogy? Apparently, so he could show that Jesus appeared just at the right moment, when the messiah was supposed to appear. Whether Matthew's genealogy is historically correct is not really the point of his narrative. The genealogy is meant to say something about Jesus: Jesus really was the Jewish Messiah descended from the venerable Jewish line of King David.

Jesus' Jewish-ness continues to be at the forefront in the stories that come next, stories also not found in Mark, of Jesus' miraculous birth (see Matthew 1:18–23). Probably the most striking thing about these stories as found in Matthew, which are different from Luke's account, is that they mirror the accounts of the birth of Moses in the Hebrew Bible. A boy is born under a hostile regime (Egypt, Rome); the ruling power wants to destroy him (the Pharaoh, Herod); he is divinely protected; he sojourns in Egypt; he leaves Egypt; goes through the water (the Exodus of the Red Sea, the waters of baptism); and goes up onto a mountain (Mount Sinai, the Sermon on the Mount) to deliver God's law. It appears that Matthew wants to portray Jesus as a *new* Moses, a new savior of the people of Israel.

Some people have pointed out the striking fact that there are five major blocks of Jesus' teaching in Matthew, the first of which is the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5–7. Most of this material is not found in Mark (it comes from Q). Why five blocks of teaching? Is it to form a parallel to the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch? Notice further, though, that all the events of the story (e.g., Jesus' conception by a virgin [Isaiah 7:14], his birth in Bethlehem, his flight to Egypt) are all explicitly said to fulfill Scripture. The emphasis is clear: Jesus is the Jewish messiah sent from the Jewish God in fulfillment of the Jewish Scripture.

He is also one who, like Moses, will deliver his law to his people. This becomes clear in the first major block of teaching, where Jesus goes up on a mount to deliver his teaching (like Moses going up to Mount Sinai to receive



Dore Bible Illustrations, Courtesy of Dover Pictorial Archive Series.

Jesus on the Sea of Galilee. Until his final trip to Jerusalem, Jesus spent most of his time preaching in rural villages in Galilee.

the Law from God?). He begins not by espousing an entirely new teaching, but by interpreting for his hearers the teachings of Moses in the so-called “antitheses” (statements in which he places his own teachings in opposition to the typical understanding of Moses). Here, he does not at all deny the validity of what Moses prescribed. He stresses its importance and pushes its meaning beyond the simple and the literal: Moses said not to kill, but you shouldn’t even become angry; Moses said not to commit adultery, but you shouldn’t even lust.

Jesus wants his followers to follow not only the letter of the Law, but its very spirit. Some readers have assumed that he could not seriously expect people not to get angry or not to lust, but Matthew gives no indication that Jesus means otherwise. Jesus’ followers will follow the Law of Moses even better than the revered Jewish leaders do. This becomes clear in what is probably the key passage in the Sermon on the Mount: 5:17–20. Jesus himself fulfilled the Jewish Law completely, and only those who are even more righteous in keeping the Law than the scribes and Pharisees will enter the Kingdom. On the one hand, this may seem impossibly difficult; on the other hand, for Matthew, it is a relatively simple matter. Jesus teaches that the entire Law can be summed up in two of its commandments: to love God above all else and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (22:35–40).

The counterbalance to this stress on the Jewish-ness of Jesus comes in the forceful opposition to the Jewish leaders found in this Gospel (see chapter 23). This opposition is especially pronounced in his various confrontations with the upright Jewish leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, whom Jesus calls “white-washed sepulchres”—seemingly clean on the outside but filled with rot and corruption within. Jesus sees these leaders as complete hypocrites who don’t practice what they preach. They stress what is picayune and overlook what is central, “straining at gnats but swallowing

For Matthew, it is a relatively simple matter. Jesus teaches that the entire Law can be summed up in two of its commandments: to love God above all else and to love one’s neighbor as oneself (22:35–40).

camels” (23:24). They are portrayed as godless and heartless, blind leaders who know the right thing to do but don’t raise a finger to do it.

Because of this harsh opposition to the Jewish leaders, this Gospel is sometimes read as being anti-Jewish, but that may be taking the matter too far. The closest thing to any real opposition to Jews per se comes in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate. In this account, Pilate declares Jesus innocent and washes his hands of his blood, while the Jewish crowds assume responsibility for Jesus’ death, crying out “his blood be upon us and our children” (27:25). Even here, though, the real culprits are portrayed as the Jewish *leaders* who have stirred up the crowds.

In conclusion, these are the main points we’ve seen in our consideration of Matthew’s distinctive portrayal of Jesus. As in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus in Matthew is portrayed as the Son of God who must die for the sins of the world. But here the stress is much more on the Jewish aspects of who he was. For Matthew, Jesus was the Jewish messiah sent from the Jewish God to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Law. Jesus—as messiah—gave the true interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures to his Jewish followers, who were then expected to fulfill the Jewish Law, even better than the scribes and Pharisees. ■

Essential Reading

The Gospel of Matthew.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 8.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 7.

Supplemental Reading

Brown, *Birth of the Messiah*.

Carter, *What Are They Saying About the Sermon on the Mount?*

Senior, *What Are They Saying About Matthew?*

Questions to Consider

1. Many people today consider Judaism and Christianity to be two completely distinct religions. How would Matthew react to this view?
2. If Matthew were so insistent that Christians needed to follow the Jewish Law, does that mean Christians today should refuse to work on the Sabbath (Saturday) and should keep kosher?
3. Matthew's thorough opposition to the Jewish establishment has been used over the centuries as justification for acts of anti-Semitism. In what sense should Matthew himself be held responsible for such acts of hatred? Is there some sense in which he himself should be seen as anti-Semitic (even though he does stress Jesus' own Jewish-ness)?

Luke—Jesus the Savior of the World

Lecture 7

Luke portrays Jesus as a Jewish prophet whose salvation goes to the whole world to bring salvation, not just to Jews, but also to Gentiles, in fulfillment of the plan of God.

Luke has a distinctive emphasis of his own. On the one hand, like Mark, Luke portrays Jesus as the Son of God whose death fulfilled the Scriptures. But he does not stress the failure of everyone to recognize Jesus—in fact, Jesus is worshipped even as an infant. Like Matthew, Luke maintains that Jesus is the messiah. But Luke does not stress that Jesus was the new Moses who demanded that his followers adhere to the Jewish Law. Instead, Luke stresses that Jesus' salvation comes not just to the Jews, but to all people. This is not to say that Jesus is not portrayed as Jewish here. Jesus is portrayed as a Jewish prophet (that is, one who knows God's will and has been called by God to proclaim it to his people) who has been rejected by the Jewish people. It is precisely because he is rejected by Jews that Jesus' message of salvation is taken to the non-Jewish people, that is, the Gentiles.

In exploring Luke's Gospel, we can begin by considering some background information. As with the other Gospels, this one is anonymous. Tradition has ascribed it to a Gentile physician named Luke, known to have been a traveling companion of the apostle Paul. Whether we can trust this 2nd-century tradition or not continues to be a matter of debate among scholars. This Gospel was written in Greek, apparently at about the time of Matthew (80–85 A.D.). There is little to suggest that Matthew and Luke knew each other's work, but they both appear to have had access to a copy of the Gospel of Mark and the lost source of Jesus' sayings called Q. One of the things that makes this Gospel distinct is the fact that its author wrote a second volume: the Book of Acts—our only surviving account of the history of earliest Christianity after the death of Jesus up through the ministry of the apostle Paul.

One way to approach Luke's account is by comparing it with the narratives we have already studied. Luke's preface is like prefaces found in the works

of other ancient historians (1:1–14). He tells us his sources of information, which are written accounts and oral tradition. Luke does not think favorably of his predecessor Gospel writers. He dedicates this work to “Theophilus,” perhaps a pagan Roman administrator of status or perhaps a fictional recipient whose name means “loved by God” or “lover of God.” Even though Luke did not use Matthew as a source, a comparison of the two can reveal some of Luke’s special emphases.

Like Matthew, but unlike Mark, Luke provides a genealogy of Jesus. This genealogy is strikingly different from the one found in Matthew. In fact, in places it is quite literally a different genealogy—all the way from Jesus’ father’s father back to King David. (The attempt to reconcile these differences by saying that Luke’s genealogy gives the family tree of Mary rather than of Joseph overlooks the rather obvious fact that it claims to give the ancestors of Joseph.) More significantly, Luke does not stress Jesus’ ties to David and Abraham. Instead, Luke’s genealogy goes as far back as one can imagine: to the progenitor of the human race, Adam (3:23–38). Unlike in Matthew, then, the emphasis here is not that Jesus is closely connected to the Jewish people through the king of Israel all the way back to the father of the Jews. Luke emphasizes that Jesus is closely connected to the entire human race through the father of us all. For this author more than any other we’ve seen, Jesus’ salvation comes to the entire world.

This stress can be found throughout Luke at critical junctures, as can be seen by comparing several episodes with those found in Mark. About halfway through Jesus’ ministry in Mark, he goes to his hometown and preaches in the synagogue, only to be rejected by his own people, who can’t understand how a simple carpenter can speak such words of wisdom (Mark 6:1–6). Luke has the account, but changes it significantly (Luke 4:16–30). The first thing to notice is that in Luke, this episode occurs as the very first event in Jesus’ ministry. The story is used, in other words, to set the stage for all that is to come. Moreover, the account is much longer in Luke, who has Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah, then claim that these very predictions are fulfilled in him. Unlike in Mark, Jesus likens himself to two prominent prophets of the Hebrew Bible, Elijah and Elisha, who were sent (to the chagrin of their compatriots) to minister to both Jews and Gentiles. The people in the synagogue become outraged at Jesus’ claims about himself and not only

abuse him verbally, as in Mark, but also attempt to kill him (4:29–30). This foreshadows what is to come in the rest of Luke’s narrative. As in Mark, Jesus does great miracles and delivers authoritative teachings, in preparation for his death in Jerusalem. Even more so in Luke, however, he is portrayed as a Jewish prophet who has been rejected—to the death—by the Jewish people so that his message can go beyond the bounds of Judaism to the Gentiles and the whole world.

Jesus, then, is principally portrayed by Luke as a rejected Jewish prophet. He is born like a prophet. Like Matthew, Luke has a birth narrative in which Jesus is born of a virgin, Mary, in Bethlehem. But here the emphasis is not

**Jesus is principally
portrayed by Luke as a
rejected Jewish prophet.**

on his fulfillment of Scripture (Luke never explicitly stresses Scripture), nor on his similarities to Moses (Luke lacks the stories of Herod’s trying to kill the child, the flight to Egypt, and so on). Instead of reminding one of Moses, Luke’s birth stories recall the birth of another famous Jewish prophet,

Samuel, to the extent that Mary’s song of thanksgiving to God mirrors the song sung by Samuel’s mother, Hanna, in the Hebrew Bible (Luke 1:46–55; cf., 1 Sam 2:1–10).

Jesus preaches like a prophet, as we have seen in the sermon in Nazareth. He claims that the prophecies have been fulfilled in him. He portrays himself as a prophet like Elijah and Elisha. Jesus also heals like a prophet. The story of his raising the dead son of a widow at Nain (found only in Luke 7:11–17) is remarkably similar to the story of the prophet Elijah’s raising the dead son of a widow at Zarephath (1 Kings 17:7–24). The crowds acknowledge the significance of what Jesus has done on the occasion: “a great prophet has risen among us” (Luke 7:16).

And finally Jesus dies like a prophet. Jesus explicitly says (only in Luke) that he must go to Jerusalem to be killed because that’s where the prophets die (Luke 13:33). Because he’s a prophet who fully knows God’s will, Jesus shows no real agony or indecision before his death in Luke. This can be seen by contrasting Luke’s “Garden of Gethsemane” scene with the one found in Mark. In Luke, Jesus is calm and in control, even in the period of greatest

temptation. Luke's portrayal of Jesus' death is completely different from the one in Mark. Rather than being silent and shocked, feeling forsaken of all, even God, in Luke Jesus dies in complete control of the situation, in full confidence of God, knowing what must happen and why. As a prophet, he knows what must happen. Most strikingly—and unlike Mark—Jesus speaks early, often, and confidently throughout his way to Calvary and during the crucifixion.

This emphasis on Jesus as a prophet—one who knows God's will and is sent to proclaim it—coincides with another emphasis in Luke, that everything that happens to Jesus and his followers happens according to God's plan. Luke frequently speaks of the “plan” or “will” of God. Nothing happens in this Gospel that hasn't been foreseen. In particular, in Luke's Gospel, unlike Mark's, there's no emphasis on the apocalyptic notion that the end of the world is imminent. This can be seen in the ways Luke modifies Jesus' words about the coming end (cf., Mark 9:1 and Luke 9:27 or Mark 14:62 and Luke 22:69). No longer is there a sense that the end will come while the disciples are still alive. For Luke, the Kingdom of God was already at hand in Jesus. For Luke, the end could not come immediately (as well he knew, by then, that it hadn't), because first the Gospel had to be taken into all the world to allow the Gentiles time to hear and repent. That is what Luke's second volume (Acts) is about—how God planned the salvation brought by Jesus to be taken throughout the world.

Because the world is to go on for a long time, it's not surprising that Luke has a stronger social agenda than the other Gospels. Jesus stresses the poor and needy in his teachings. (Compare, for example, the Beatitudes. In Matthew, it's “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness [Matthew 5:3–11].” In Luke, it's “Blessed are you poor” and “Blessed are you who hunger and thirst [Luke 6:20–26].” Also compare the Parable of the Good Samaritan.) Jesus emphasizes more the rights and needs of women (cf., Luke 10:38–42, a story found only in Luke, in which Martha is praised for not being concerned with her “womanly” duties but for learning from the teacher, presumably along with the other disciples.)

In conclusion, Luke is both like and unlike the two other Synoptic Gospels. Like both Mark and Matthew, Luke describes Jesus' public ministry as one filled with miraculous feats and marvelous teachings, and he, too, sees the importance of Jesus' death for God's plan of salvation. Rather than stressing Jesus as the misunderstood Son of God, as in Mark, or as the Jewish messiah who insists that his followers keep the Jewish Law, as in Matthew, Luke portrays Jesus as a Jewish prophet whose salvation goes out to the whole world, to bring salvation to both Jews and Gentiles, in fulfillment of the plan of God. ■

Essential Reading

The Gospel of Luke.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 9.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 8.

Supplemental Reading

Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*.

Juel, *Luke–Acts: The Promise of History*.

Powell, *What Are They Saying About Luke?*

Questions to Consider

1. How might the fact that Luke produced a *two*-volume work affect the way we should interpret either volume? Should we, or can we, read one volume in light of the emphases of the other?
2. If Luke were writing principally to show that Jesus was the savior of the entire world, why would he emphasize so strongly that he was a *Jewish* prophet?

3. Do you see the three different accounts of Jesus that we have examined as complementary to one another or contradictory? Is it possible for them all to be historically accurate, if they tell the same stories but give different accounts? Do you see any explicit discrepancies?

John—Jesus the Man from Heaven

Lecture 8

The Gospel of John, the fourth Gospel, [is] a book that is so different from the other three that, sometimes, it is known amongst scholars as a “maverick” Gospel.

To this point, we have considered the portrayals of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, books called the Synoptic Gospels because they have so many traditions in common that they can be “seen together.” Despite their numerous similarities, we have seen that they each have a distinctive emphasis in the portrayal of Jesus. Traditionally, the book has been ascribed to John, the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus’ closest disciples. This ascription cannot be found until near the end of the 2nd century; the book is, in fact, anonymous. In the earlier sources, the disciple John is portrayed as a lower-class peasant from Galilee, who presumably spoke Aramaic, not the Greek in which the Gospel is written. Moreover, John is said in the New Testament itself to have been illiterate (Acts 4:13). It seems unlikely that he was directly responsible for writing this book, which appears to have been produced near the end of the 1st century (90–95 A.D.). As was the case with the other Gospels, we’ll continue to call this one “John” in lieu of a better option.

In very rough outline, John is like the other Gospels. Here, too, is an account of Jesus’ ministry of teaching and healing, leading up to his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. Moreover, John shares several stories with the other Gospels, especially in the Passion narrative. But the differences between John and the Synoptics are nonetheless striking. This can be seen just in terms of its contents. John lacks most of the stories that form the backbone of the Synoptic Gospel portrayals of Jesus. Among those notably absent from John are accounts of Jesus’ birth, his baptism by John, his temptation in the wilderness, his proclamation of the coming Kingdom of God, his telling of parables, his casting out of demons, his transfiguration before some of his disciples, his institution of the Lord’s Supper, his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and his trial before the Jewish authorities. These stories form

the heart and core of the Synoptic accounts of Jesus' life, but none of them is found in John.

On the other hand, John has numerous stories of his own, not found in the Synoptics. Some of Jesus' most startling deeds are found only here; for example, the turning of the water into wine (2:1–12) and the raising of Lazarus from the dead (11:1–44). Some of Jesus' most memorable teachings are also found only here; for example, his conversation with the Jewish rabbi, Nicodemus, in which Jesus says, “you must be born again” (3:3) and his famous “I am” sayings, in which he identifies himself as the only one who can bring salvation: “I am the light of the world,” “I am the bread of life,” “I am the resurrection and the life.” Some of the differences between John and the Synoptics have been seen by readers over the years as actual discrepancies. We've seen one example already: John appears to have Jesus die on a different day and at a different time than the Synoptics (on the afternoon before the Passover meal was eaten in John; on the morning after in the Synoptics). Another example that is commonly cited involves Jesus' cleansing of the temple, which in John occurs not during the final week of Jesus' life as in the Synoptics, but at the very beginning of his ministry (2:13–22).

In some ways, even more revealing of the distinctiveness of this Gospel are the differences in emphases that it places on material shared with the other Gospels. In all four Gospels, for example, Jesus is portrayed as a miracle worker, but the reasons for his miracles are quite different in John than in the Synoptics. The Synoptics show Jesus doing miracles to help people in need; he explicitly refuses to do them to prove his own identity. For example, in Matthew, after Jesus has healed a blind man, some people believe that he must be the messiah. The Scribes and Pharisees approach him, asking him to do a “sign” to prove it to them. He refuses, saying, “no sign will be given to this evil and adulterous generation” (Matthew 12:39). A similar message is given in the Synoptic account of the Temptations in the wilderness. At one point, Jesus is tempted to jump from the Temple to be miraculously swept up by the angels before hitting the ground—evidently to prove to the Jewish worshippers gathered there that he is the one sent from God. Jesus spurns this desire as a Satanic temptation (Matthew 4:5–7).

In John, rather than spurning the temptation to produce a sign for his onlookers, Jesus does miracles precisely to prove his identity. In fact, in John, his stupendous deeds aren't called miracles but signs. At one point, Jesus says that his signs are designed to make people believe and that people won't be able to believe without the signs (4:54). The Gospel itself indicates that the signs of Jesus are written to make people believe (20:30–31). It is striking that neither Jesus' refusal to offer a sign nor the temptation narrative appears in John.

In the Synoptics, Jesus' miraculous deeds are done in response to a person's faith; in John, they are meant to generate that faith. In the Synoptics, Jesus refuses to do miracles to prove who he is; in John, he does them for just that reason. These differences can be seen in two separate accounts, one in Mark, one in John, of Jesus raising a person from the dead at the request of a family member: the raising of Jairus's daughter in Mark 5 and the raising of Lazarus in John 11. The stories are striking in their basic formal similarities. In both, a family member asks Jesus to come to help a sick person before it's too late, but he does not arrive in time and the person has died in the meantime. In both accounts, onlookers mock Jesus for thinking that he can now do something about the death, and he speaks of the person as "sleeping" (a Greek euphemism for having died). In both accounts, he goes to where the person is and commands him or her to arise; the person arises, and Jesus orders the onlookers to take care of his or her physical needs.

In view of the strong formal similarities of the stories, their differences cannot help but attract our notice. In Mark's account (Mark 5), Jesus goes as soon as he is summoned, privately entering the girl's room, taking only the parents and three of his disciples, and ordering the witnesses strictly not to tell anyone what they have seen. In John's account (John 11), Jesus intentionally does not go to Lazarus when he is ill, because, as he tells his disciples, he wanted Lazarus to die so that he could raise him from the dead as a public display of his power. He comes then to Lazarus's tomb with the crowds surrounding him and commands Lazarus to rise from the dead. To the amazement of the crowds, Lazarus comes forth. In one account, Jesus orders secrecy; in the other, he makes his miracle a public display of power. In one story, he refuses to do miracles to convince people of who he is; in the other, that's precisely what he does. It's no accident that Mark has the one

story and John has the other. In the Synoptics, Jesus refuses to establish his credentials through his miraculous deeds; in John that is why he does them.

This difference corresponds to a second difference in emphasis. In both the Synoptics and John, Jesus engages in public teaching. But the content of his teaching is significantly different. In the Synoptics, Jesus teaches about the coming Kingdom of God through parables. This is portrayed as a future kingdom, in which God will provide fullness of life to all who repent in preparation for its coming. This teaching is predominantly done through parables, short, simple, and symbolic illustrations of spiritual truths. According to Mark 4, Jesus taught the crowds only through telling parables. Jesus never instructs his disciples on his own identity as one who is divine.

John's Gospel is quite unlike the others, both in its content and its emphases.

In John, though, that's virtually *all* he talks about: who he is, whence he has come, how he relates to God the Father, and how he is the one sent from God to bring salvation to the world. Strikingly, Jesus never proclaims a future coming kingdom in John, a kingdom in which all the wrongs of this world will be made right. He never tells a parable in John. Jesus instead speaks about his own identity. He is the one from God, who is in fact equal with God, who can bring eternal life to those who believe in him. In the Synoptics, the focus of Jesus' teaching is God and the kingdom he is about to bring in the future; in John, the focus is on Jesus himself and the eternal life that he brings here and now.

These two differences in emphases are linked together in John's Gospel. Jesus teaches principally about himself and does miracles to provide the evidence. Jesus says that he is the "bread that brings life" and he feeds the multitudes to prove it (chap. 6). He says that he is the "light of the world" and he heals a blind man to prove it (chap. 9). He says that he is the "resurrection and the life" and he raises a man from the dead to prove it (chap. 11). Jesus here is much more than the man we find in the Synoptics. He is God come to earth to provide salvation to the world. This same sense is not found in the Synoptics. This emphasis, so unlike the Synoptics, is found

in the beginning of the Gospel, in the “prologue,” which indicates that Jesus is the Word of God who existed from the beginning of all things, through whom God created the universe, who has now become a human being (1:1–14). That’s why, throughout the Gospel, anyone who sees Jesus is said to have seen the Father, whoever does what he commands does the will of the Father, whoever rejects him has rejected the Father (14:10–14; 3:18). No longer is Jesus simply God’s misunderstood messiah or prophet; now he is, himself, fully divine. As he says here, “I and the Father are one” (10:10) and, as Thomas confesses, “My Lord and my God” (20:28).

In conclusion, I think it’s safe to say that John’s Gospel is quite unlike the others, both in its content and its emphases. John lacks a number of the accounts found in the Synoptics and contains numerous memorable stories preserved in his Gospel alone. Even more significantly, John provides a completely different portrayal of Jesus. No longer is he merely a compassionate miracle worker who responds to people’s faith and proclaims the coming kingdom of God, a prophet rejected by his own people. He is not even the Jewish Messiah sent from the Jewish God in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. Now Jesus himself is divine, who spends his entire public ministry teaching that he is the one sent from God for the salvation of the world and who does miracles to prove that what he says is true. ■

Essential Reading

The Gospel of John.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 11.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 10.

Supplemental Reading

Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel*.

Sloyan, *What Are They Saying About John?*

Smith, *The Theology of John*.

Questions to Consider

1. How might the differences between John and the Synoptics affect the question of whether this book was actually written by Jesus' own disciple, John, the son of Zebedee?
2. In what ways do modern Christian understandings of Jesus as both God and man seem more closely tied to the portrayal of Jesus in John than in the Synoptics?
3. Discuss whether the more exalted view of Jesus found in the Gospel of John can be reconciled with the portrayals of Jesus found in the other Gospels. If Matthew, Mark, and Luke also thought of Jesus as divine, why was this not a major emphasis in their accounts? Or did they think so at all?

Noncanonical Gospels

Lecture 9

While these other Gospels are, for the most part, much later in date and more legendary in character than the New Testament Gospels, they nonetheless are significant for scholars of the New Testament.

We have now completed our examination of the New Testament Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It would be a mistake to think that these were the only accounts of Jesus' words and deeds produced by the early Christians. We have seen, for example, that two of the Gospel writers—Matthew and Luke—probably had access to a written collection of Jesus' sayings, called Q, and other sources that scholars have labeled M and L. None of these documents survives. Other Gospels from early Christianity do survive—a large number of them discovered only during the past century.

There are over 20 of these other Gospels, mostly fragments, which range in date from the 2nd to the 8th centuries A.D. They too, like the New Testament Gospels, had a variety of sources for their stories about Jesus. They used previously existing written accounts—including, in most cases, the New Testament Gospels themselves. They also borrowed extensively from the legendary traditions that continued to be circulated and made up about Jesus through the centuries. There are, very roughly speaking, two kinds of Gospels found among these noncanonical texts: Narrative Gospels are like the Gospels of the New Testament in that they contain accounts of the life and (sometimes) death of Jesus told in narrative form. Sayings Gospels are like the lost source Q, containing principally collections of Jesus' teachings.

To illustrate the first of these categories, we can look at one of the most intriguing of the noncanonical Gospels, one that actually claims to have been written by Jesus' own disciple Simon Peter and is, therefore, called the Gospel of Peter. The Gospel was discovered in a monk's tomb near the end of the 19th century. Even though, unlike the anonymous Gospels of the New Testament, this book actually claims to be written by the disciple of Jesus, it is almost certainly a forgery written sometime during the 2nd century.

Before its discovery, we knew about the account, because it is mentioned by early Church Fathers, who condemned it as heretical. Eusebius was a 4th-century author who is known as the “Father of Church History.” His 10-volume book, called *Ecclesiastical History*, provides us with a good deal of information about Christianity in the first four centuries. According to Eusebius, the Gospel of Peter was read by one of the churches ruled over by the 2nd-century bishop of Antioch, Serapion. Once Serapion was warned that the book contained heretical teachings, he examined it himself and forbade its use. We presume that what we now have in hand is this long-lost Gospel. Unfortunately, the part that was discovered is only a fragment of the original. It contains an account of Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, and resurrection, but the fragment begins in the middle of a sentence and breaks off in the middle of a sentence.

The part of this Gospel that survives is in many ways like the passion accounts of the New Testament. Jesus is put on trial before Pilate. He is condemned to death. There is an account of his crucifixion. Three days later, he is raised from the dead. What is more striking, though, are the differences from the New Testament accounts. Here “the Jews” are held to be even more liable for Jesus’ death than in the New Testament Gospels. They know full well that they have sinned against God in condemning Jesus, but they still urge Pilate to have Jesus killed and they actually do the dirty work themselves—then regret it, fearing that now God will destroy them and their city. Jesus does not appear actually to suffer in this account (v. 10: “he was silent as if he felt no pain”); this may have been what led to Serapion’s condemnation of the book as heretical, because it implies that Jesus was not fully human. There is a fantastic description of Jesus emerging from the tomb—supported by angels as tall as the sky, himself towering above them, with the cross itself coming forth from the tomb behind. A voice asks whether he has preached to those who have already died, and the cross replies, “Yes.”

These striking features make it appear that the Gospel of Peter was written in the 2nd century A.D. Christians had begun to hold the Jews completely accountable for Jesus’ death at this time. Some Christians at the time also maintained that Jesus, as fully divine, could not have really suffered. The legendary details surrounding the resurrection appear to be later additions to the stories about Jesus. Whether the writer of this account had full access

to the earlier Gospels of the New Testament and used those accounts to construct this one remains a question that is answered differently by different scholars. There are no lengthy verbatim agreements between Peter and the four canonical Gospels.

A second type of Gospel preserved from ancient Christianity is a “sayings” Gospel, a kind of document that principally records Jesus’ sayings, rather than his deeds or his death and resurrection. Perhaps the most brilliant illustration of this kind of text is the now-famous Gospel of Thomas, one of the most remarkable discoveries of the 20th century. The Gospel was discovered in the 1940s by an Egyptian Bedouin, named Mohammed Ali,

Gnostics believed that there was a radical disjuncture between the worlds of matter and spirit: matter was inherently evil; spirit was good.

near his small village Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt. The discovery was a complete accident; Mohammed Ali and his brothers were digging for fertilizer and happened on an earthenware jar containing 13 ancient leather-bound books. These books contained anthologies of texts—52 documents altogether, all written in Coptic, an ancient

Egyptian language, although they appear to be Coptic translations of Greek originals. The leather-bound books were manufactured in the mid-4th century (as shown by dated scraps of paper used to strengthen the bindings). The texts contained in the books are much older, though. Most of them are known to have been in existence at least two centuries earlier. The most famous of these 52 texts is the Gospel of Thomas, but the entire collection is highly significant, because it appears to have been the library of a group of Gnostic Christians.

Gnosticism was a prominent form of Christianity in Egypt in the 2nd century A.D. We had previously known about the Gnostics almost exclusively from the writings of their opponents, the Christian Church Fathers. The discovery near Nag Hammadi provided our first major collection of texts written by and for Gnostics themselves. An examination of the writings of the fathers and the primary texts shows some of the major components of Gnostic thought.

Gnostics believed that there was a radical disjuncture between the worlds of matter and spirit: matter was inherently evil; spirit was good. Some people in the world were pure matter. These people were like all other animals—destined for annihilation. But other people (i.e., the Gnostics themselves) had a spark of the divine within them, which had become entrapped in this world of matter. They had become entrapped because of the nefarious workings of the creator of this world, who was not the true God but an ignorant and far less powerful being, intent on bringing harm to the divine realm. The goal of the Gnostic religion was to escape from the material trappings of this world to allow the divine spark to return to its original spiritual home. Escape could come only by acquiring the knowledge necessary for salvation. These people are called *Gnostics*, because the Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*. The only way to acquire this knowledge, though, was for a divine emissary to come down from the spiritual realm to instruct you on what you had to know. Christ, for these people, represented the divine being who came to earth to teach the truth that could lead to salvation. Salvation came to those who understood the secret meanings of his words.

In the judgment of most scholars, the Gospel of Thomas was a Gospel written for Gnostics. It consists of 114 sayings of Jesus—no narrative at all. The point of this Gospel is that those who learn the secret teachings of Jesus will have eternal life (v. 1). It is not by believing in his death that one finds salvation, but by understanding his words. A number of the sayings in this Gospel are like those of the New Testament. For example, here, too, one finds the parable of the mustard seed and the saying “If a blind man leads a blind man, they both fall into a pit” (saying 34). Other sayings convey the Gnostic understanding of the world as a realm that must be escaped if one is to find true life. The body is likened to a set of clothes that must be removed—even trampled on—if one is to be saved (saying 37). Moreover, salvation is not something that will come in the future in the Kingdom of God but in the reuniting of the person with the divine realm from which it came (sayings 3, 11, 29, 113).

The author of this book calls himself Didymus Judas Thomas; he was believed in parts of the ancient church to be the actual brother of Jesus. Needless to say, scholars today are unified in considering the book to be forged in Thomas’s name. The question of where the author acquired his

sayings continues to be debated. The most dominant view among scholars today is that he did *not* acquire them from the Gospels of the New Testament but from oral traditions that he had heard. If he had acquired the sayings from the New Testament, it would be hard to explain why he left so many out and why the ones he included are always worded so differently.

These then, in conclusion, are two of the noncanonical Gospels, books that allegedly record the sayings and deeds of Jesus but that did not make it into the New Testament. The Gospel of Peter is a legendary account of Jesus' death and resurrection. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of Jesus' sayings, some of which sound very much like the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels, while others show clear evidence of Gnostic understanding of the world. The legendary nature of these accounts should alert us to a fact that will begin to be significant in the next lecture; namely, that Christians made up traditions about Jesus. Not everything we read about Jesus in a written account from antiquity can be taken as referring to the historical Jesus himself. We saw this even with respect to the New Testament Gospels themselves. They, too, contain stories that appear to have been changed, or even created, by Christians trying to convince others that Jesus really was the Son of God. In the next part of this course, we are going to move from considering the Gospels as portrayals of Jesus to asking how we can use these ancient accounts to reconstruct what Jesus himself actually did say and do. That is to say, how can we get behind the legendary traditions about Jesus to discover the man himself? ■

Essential Reading

"The Gospel of Peter," in Ehrman, *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, pp. 124–26.

"The Gospel of Thomas," in Ehrman, *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, pp. 116–23.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 12.

Supplemental Reading

Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways do the Gospels of Peter and Thomas seem to be like, and in what ways unlike, the Gospels of the New Testament?
2. Summarize the beliefs of the Gnostics. Given what you know about them, which of the New Testament Gospels would seem to you to be most useful to Gnostic Christians? Are there religions in America today that have beliefs similar to those of the Gnostics?
3. Given the legendary accounts that sprang up about Jesus, how do you suppose one can separate pious fiction from historical fact in the earliest Christian Gospels?

The Historical Jesus—Sources and Problems

Lecture 10

There is not much evidence for Jesus' life and teachings outside of the New Testament Gospels.

To this point in our study of the Gospels, both canonical and noncanonical, our overall purpose has been to appreciate each work as a piece of literature with a distinct portrayal of Jesus. We have not, however, begun to ask the more historical question: What can we say about Jesus himself, what he actually said and did? As we move beyond looking at the Gospels as literature into examining how they can be used as historical sources for the life of Jesus, we face another issue: Given that different Gospels portray Jesus differently and that all the Gospels embody traditions that have been more or less altered in the course of their transmission, how can we get behind the portrayals of Jesus in these accounts to see what the man himself was really like? That will be the goal of the next three lectures: to consider our accounts not as literary products designed to convey a particular view of Jesus but as historical sources useful for the task of historical reconstruction.

One place to begin any attempt to reconstruct the life of Jesus is by asking if there are sources *outside* the Gospels that might be useful. It might be useful, for example, to see not only what believers said about him, but also what unbelievers said; to see not only how his friends understood him, but also how his enemies did. For the purposes of our study, we might divide our ancient sources into three groups—pagan (authors who were neither Jewish nor Christian), Jewish, and Christian. Because our concerns are strictly historical, we can probably restrict our search to sources written within 100 years of Jesus' death (that is, from 30 A.D. up to 130 A.D.).

Unfortunately, surviving pagan sources are of virtually no help in trying to reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus. Given the effect that Jesus has had on history ever since his death, one might expect that his life made an enormous impact on the society of his day—like a comet striking the earth. But if the historical record is any indication, Jesus scarcely made any impact

at all—less like a comet striking the earth than a stone being tossed into the ocean. From the 1st century A.D., we have hundreds of documents written by all kinds of pagan authors for all kinds of reasons. Among all these surviving sources, Jesus is never mentioned at all. He is not mentioned by any of the philosophers, poets, historians, or scientists; he's not named in any private letters or public inscriptions. We have no birth records, trial reports, or death certificates—we have no reference of any kind whatsoever even to Jesus' name.

Our earliest recorded references to Jesus in pagan sources come from the early 2nd century. There are, in fact, only two certain references from within our prescribed time limits (30–130 A.D.). The Roman governor of the province of Bythinia-Pontus (in modern-day Turkey), Pliny the Younger, in a letter written to his emperor, Trajan (112 A.D.), mentions a group of Christians who are followers of “Christ, whom they worship as a God” (Letter 10 to the Emperor Trajan). The Roman historian Tacitus gives a lengthier reference in his history of Rome, *The Annals* (115 A.D.), in his discussion of the torching of the city of Rome by the emperor Nero in the year 64 A.D. Here he mentions the Christians as the hatred of the human race and says that they were followers of “Christ” who, he notes, was crucified under the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was the emperor. There are no other certain references to Jesus in any pagan author within a century of his death.

The surviving Jewish sources (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls) are also of little use in reconstructing the life of Jesus. Not nearly as many Jewish sources survive. The main source for the history of Palestine in this period is Flavius Josephus. Josephus was a Jewish aristocrat who, during the revolt against Rome in 66–70 A.D., served as general of the Jewish troops in the northern part of Israel, Galilee. When he and his troops were surrounded, he agreed to a suicide pact in which lots would be drawn to see who would kill whom, until the final two would take their own lives. He drew one of the final two lots but persuaded his remaining companion to surrender. Later in the war, he was used by the Romans as an interpreter to convince other Jews to surrender, and after the war, he was rewarded for his efforts by being appointed a court historian in Rome under Emperor Vespasian. He produced a lengthy account of the Jewish Wars and, about 20 years later, a 20-volume

work on the history of the Jews from Adam and Eve onward to his own time, called the *Jewish Antiquities*.

Jesus is never mentioned in the *Jewish Wars*, but he makes two tantalizingly brief appearances in the *Antiquities*. The briefer of the two references indicates that he was called by some the messiah and that he had a brother named James. The longer reference (Book XVIII of *Antiquities*) gives

Even in the New Testament, the life of Jesus is scarcely mentioned outside of the Gospels. ... The total information would fit on a three-by-five-inch index card.

considerably more detail, indicating that Jesus was known to be a wise man who did spectacular deeds and had a following among both Jews and Greeks. This reference also says that Jesus was brought up on charges by the Jewish leaders, appeared before Pontius Pilate, and was crucified and that his followers formed a community that continued to thrive. This manuscript was

probably reproduced in the Middle Ages by a Christian scribe who may have added to it. At least this reference confirms the existence of Jesus and coincides basically with the Gospel accounts of him. It obviously is of little use if we want to know any of the details of what Jesus said and did.

The surviving Christian sources provide us with much more information. Unfortunately, as we have already seen, the Gospels outside the New Testament are too late to be of much use to us and are full of legendary materials (cf., Peter and Thomas). Even in the New Testament, the life of Jesus is scarcely mentioned outside of the Gospels (e.g., by the apostle Paul, who is far more concerned about faith in Jesus' death and resurrection than in the details of his life). The total information would fit on a three-by-five-inch index card. That means, then, that if we want to know about what Jesus said and did, our only sources are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (and possibly Thomas).

As we have already seen, these sources are also problematic if we want to use them to reconstruct what Jesus said and did. They were written between 35 to 65 years after the events they narrate. The authors were not eyewitnesses

and they appear to have acquired their stories from oral traditions that had been in circulation for decades. These traditions were evidently changed—sometimes a little, sometimes a lot—in the course of their transmission (as we saw in the case of John and Mark on the day of Jesus’ death). Sometimes even *these* authors changed the traditions they inherited (as we saw in the case of Matthew and Luke’s modifications of Matthew). The evidence for these changes is the fact that the Gospels contain accounts that appear to be irreconcilable in places.

If these are our only historical sources—and they appear to be relatively late, biased, altered, and inconsistent with one another—how can we possibly use them to reconstruct what Jesus was really like? In fact, most historians of early Christianity would agree that although we cannot use these accounts uncritically as historical sources, we can use them critically, following some rigid historical guidelines. The next lecture contains some detail on what these methods involve, but a quick overview appears below.

Scholars have devised three major criteria for examining the Gospels as historical sources for the life of Jesus. In some ways, it helps to think of the historian as a prosecuting attorney who bears the burden of proof in examining his witnesses (sources) to prove his case. The first criterion used is called “independent attestation.” Having multiple witnesses who independently agree in their accounts is stronger evidence than having only one witness. Traditions ascribed to Jesus in more than one independent source are more likely to be historically accurate.

The second criterion is called “dissimilarity.” A witness’s testimony is particularly valuable when it works against his own vested interest (e.g., when he testifies under oath that he did see his best friend commit the crime). So too, traditions ascribed to Jesus that do not seem to advance the vested interests of the Christians who were telling or writing the stories are particularly to be valued as historically accurate.

The final criterion is “contextual credibility.” A witness’s testimony will be discounted if it does not coincide with what are otherwise known to be the facts of the case. Traditions ascribed to Jesus cannot be accepted as

historically accurate if they cannot be situated credibly into what we know to be the context of Judaism in 1st-century A.D. Palestine. ■

Essential Reading

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*.

———, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 13.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1.

Supplemental Reading

Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus*.

Questions to Consider

1. Summarize what we can know about Jesus from sources outside the New Testament Gospels. Why do you suppose this information is so sparse?
2. Summarize why scholars have seen the Gospels as problematic historical sources. In your opinion, does their value as historical documents affect their importance as religious books of faith?
3. Explain the problems in the Gospels that make each of the three historical criteria (independent attestation, dissimilarity, and contextual credibility) necessary. Can you discern the logic that requires each of these criteria, given the nature of our sources?

The Historical Jesus—Solutions and Methods

Lecture 11

Scholars have developed three major criteria for establishing what Jesus really said and did based on the surviving sources. The criteria of independent attestation, dissimilarity, and contextual credibility.

The criterion of independent attestation maintains that traditions about Jesus preserved in more than one independent source are more likely to be historically accurate. The logic behind this criterion is that if two sources independently attest to a saying or deed of Jesus, then neither one of them could have made it up. It is important to stress that the sources must be independent. A saying found in both Matthew and Luke is not independently attested, because both Matthew and Luke would probably have gotten it from Q (e.g., the “Lord’s Prayer” or the Beatitudes). But a saying found in Mark and John, or in Thomas and Luke, would be independently attested, because John did not use Mark and Thomas, in all likelihood, did not use Luke.

It is also important to emphasize that independently attested traditions are not automatically authentic—they are more *likely* to be authentic. Some examples can be cited to illustrate the criterion. Stories of Jesus associating with John the Baptist are found in Mark, Q, and John (Mark 1; Matthew 3/Luke 3; John 1). Jesus is said to have brothers in Mark (6:3), John (7:3), Paul (1 Cor. 9:5), and Josephus; moreover, both Josephus and Paul (Gal. 1:19) indicate that one of these brothers was named James. Jesus tells parables in which he likens the Kingdom of God to seeds in Mark, Q, and the Gospel of Thomas. Jesus is said to have been put on trial before Pontius Pilate, then crucified in Mark, John, the Gospel of Peter, Josephus, and Tacitus.

In conclusion, I emphasize that this criterion can be used only to indicate which traditions are more likely to be historically accurate. The criterion cannot be used to show what is inaccurate. Just because the “Lord’s Prayer” comes only from Q does not mean Jesus did not actually teach it to his disciples. Just because the Parable of the Good Samaritan appears only in Luke does not mean that Jesus could not have said it.

The criterion of dissimilarity maintains that traditions ascribed to Jesus that do not seem to advance the vested interests of the Christians who were telling them are also to be valued as historically accurate. The logic behind this criterion is that we know that Christians were altering, and sometimes even inventing, stories about Jesus. They did so to make their own points about him, that is, because of their own vested interests in telling the stories. If a story does *not* advance the vested interests of the Christians telling it, then it is not a story that they would have made up. Such stories survive in the tradition precisely because they really happened.

This criterion can be used only to indicate which traditions are more likely to be historically accurate. The criterion cannot be used to show what is inaccurate.

Again, some examples of how the criterion can actually work will help to clarify it. Jesus' followers probably would not have invented the tradition that he came from Nazareth, because Nazareth was a tiny, insignificant place that no one had heard of and that had no connection with the coming messiah. If they were to "make up" a place for Jesus to be born, it would probably be Bethlehem (the home of King David) or Jerusalem (the city of God). The tradition of Jesus as a carpenter (or at least a man who worked with his hands) is another example, because this occupation had low social status. Jesus' followers probably would not have made up the idea that he was baptized by John, because that might suggest that he was spiritually inferior to John—the disciple baptized by the master. Jesus' followers probably would not have made up the story that he was betrayed by one of his own followers, because that would suggest that he could not control those who were close to him. Finally, the crucifixion is another example. The Jews would not have expected their messiah to be crucified as a criminal.

This criterion poses some difficulties. First, as should be obvious from the examples, the criterion can be used only to establish traditions that are more *probable*. It, and the other criteria, can never provide any certainty. This criterion is particularly problematic, because we don't have a full account of early Christianity and we don't know completely what the Christians' vested interests were. Moreover, like the preceding criterion of independent

attestation, this criterion can only be used in a positive way to argue *for* a tradition. The fact that a tradition does not pass the criterion does not necessarily mean that it didn't happen (for example, when Jesus predicts that he has to die in Jerusalem, surely he could have seen the handwriting on the wall), even though the nature of the tradition may give us pause (for example, his prediction that he would rise in three days, which was exactly what his later followers said had happened). The best-case scenario is when a tradition happens to pass *both* these criteria. For any tradition to be credible, it also needs to pass the third.

The criterion of contextual credibility maintains that traditions ascribed to Jesus cannot be accepted as historically accurate if they cannot be situated credibly into the context of Judaism in 1st-century Palestine. The logic of this criterion should be self-evident: Because Jesus was a 1st-century Palestinian Jew, what he said and did must make sense in the context of 1st-century Palestinian Judaism. Unlike the other criteria, this one is used to argue *against* certain traditions as historically implausible. For example, the Gospel of Thomas contains sayings that make perfect sense in the context of 2nd-century Gnosticism but sound completely unlike what a 1st-century Jew in Palestine would have said. These sayings likely do not go back to Jesus. Another example of lack of context is the discussion between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3.

Because this final criterion is so important, we will linger for a couple of minutes on a specific aspect of 1st-century Judaism. In an earlier lecture, I noted some of the important features of Judaism in the 1st century, especially its distinctive emphasis on monotheism, the covenant God made with Israel, and the Law he gave. I must also emphasize in particular one perspective that we now know to have been particularly prominent among Jews, commonly known as Jewish apocalypticism. Its relevance for understanding Jesus' own context will appear clear when I remind you of its major tenets. Apocalypticists held to a dualistic view of the world, which was made up of forces of good and evil, and everyone and everything took one side or the other. Moreover, the present age was controlled by the forces of evil, who were determined to punish anyone who took the side of the good. Apocalypticists were pessimistic about the possibilities of improving life in this evil age. The forces of evil were gaining in ascendancy and could not be

overcome through human effort. But God would eventually assert himself and overthrow these forces of evil. A judgment day was coming, and it would affect the entire world, including both the living and the dead. Once God had overcome the forces of evil, he would establish his utopian kingdom here on earth, where his people would live forever. This divine intervention was imminent. How soon? As one 1st-century Jew told his own disciples, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place.” Indeed, he said, “some of you standing here will not taste death before they see that the Kingdom of God has come in power.”

These, of course, are the words of Jesus. In the next lecture, I will argue that Jesus was a Jewish apocalypticist, who, like many of his compatriots, believed that God was soon going to intervene in the course of history and overthrow the forces of evil to bring in a good kingdom on earth, a kingdom ruled by God through his messiah. ■

Essential Reading

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*.

———, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 13.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1.

Supplemental Reading

Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus*.

Questions to Consider

1. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of each of the criteria used to establish historically authentic material from the life of Jesus?
2. Are there other criteria that you can imagine being applied to the traditions about Jesus to establish their historical accuracy?

Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet

Lecture 12

Jesus is best understood as a 1st-century Jewish apocalypticist. ... Jesus urged the people of Israel to repent before it was too late.

We have seen that the Gospels are our best sources for reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus, but they cannot be used uncritically. The criteria of independent attestation, dissimilarity, and contextual credibility can assist us, though, in working to get behind the Gospels to the historical events they narrate. Because of time constraints, I won't be able to explain how every tradition I discuss in this lecture passes one or more of these criteria, but full explanations can be found in the readings I've suggested. It is important to stress that the historical context of Jesus involves a particularly influential ideology known as Jewish apocalypticism. In this lecture, I'll explain why many contemporary scholars have understood Jesus as an apocalypticist and show how an apocalyptic perspective can elucidate his words and deeds.

The idea that Jesus was an apocalypticist, expecting the imminent end of history as we know it through a decisive intervention by God, is not new among recent scholars. It was first argued convincingly at the beginning of the century by Albert Schweitzer, the great humanitarian and medical missionary in the Belgian Congo, in his classic text *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906). Most scholars in Germany and America have subscribed to this view for most of the 20th century, although the idea has come under attack in more recent years.

The reasons for holding this view are compelling. It is suggested by the fact that Jesus began his ministry by associating with John the Baptist, an apocalyptic preacher of repentance, rather than some other Jewish leader of his day (e.g., a Pharisee or a Sadducee). We learn some about John in Josephus but mostly in the New Testament. He preached that God's judgment of a sinful world was at hand. The idea is corroborated by the fact that Jesus' followers, even after his death, believed that they were living at the

end of time, that God's judgment was near. Paul, whose writings come first chronologically, conveys this idea.

The idea is also confirmed by the fact that the earliest sources (namely, Mark and Q) are filled with sayings of Jesus that anticipate the imminent end of this age, the coming judgment, and the appearance of God's Kingdom (e.g. Mark 8:38; 13:24–27, 30; Luke 17:24–30; 12:39). Interestingly, this emphasis is muted in later sources. As we have seen, the Gospel of Luke changes Jesus' predictions in Mark that the end is imminent. In the still later Gospel of John, Jesus does not preach at all about the coming Kingdom. And in the still later Gospel of Thomas, Jesus is shown arguing *against* an apocalyptic understanding of salvation. There appears to be a clear trend here: the later the tradition, the less apocalyptic it is. How might one explain the trend? When the earlier expectations of an imminent end did not materialize, were Christians forced to modify their understanding? If so, this would suggest that the expectation of an imminent end was most fervent at the earliest stages—that is, during the life of Jesus himself.

As a preacher of repentance, Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was near. His first words in Mark's Gospel are a fair summary of his teaching: "The time has been fulfilled, the kingdom of God is near; repent and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Jesus taught that a real Kingdom was coming to earth, one that stood in contrast with the evil kingdoms run by the pagan rulers of earth. This kingdom would be ruled by none other than God, through his human emissary, the messiah. The judgment would be brought by a cosmic judge from heaven, whom Jesus called the Son of Man, probably in reference to a prediction found in the Jewish Scriptures (Dan. 7:13–14) about the end of the present age (Mark 8:38; 14:62). Although in some other Gospel passages, Jesus refers to himself as the "Son of Man," he did not appear to be referring to himself in these sayings (cf., Mark 8:38). The Son of Man would bring cosmic destruction (Mark 13:26–27). This judgment would fall on all people and institutions. Even the Jewish Temple, the seat of the Jewish religion, would be destroyed (Mark 13:1–2). Jesus' prediction of this destruction is attested by multiple sources.

The coming judgment would involve a complete reversal of the present order, in accordance with apocalyptic logic. The first shall be last and the last, first

(Mark 10:30). Those who suffer now will be blessed then (Luke 6:20–23). And people needed to prepare for the coming of the judgment. They should repent of wrongdoing (Mark 1:15). They should give up their power and their wealth, to become like small children and slaves (Mark 10:13–15, 23–30, 42–44). They should give up everything they have for the sake of this coming kingdom (Matthew 13:45–46).

Jesus maintained that other Jewish leaders of his day had misunderstood God's will. Pharisees were wrong in thinking that God was concerned with the letter of the law instead of its spirit. "Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27–28). Sadducees were wrong in thinking that God was ultimately concerned about the sacrifices in the Jewish temple. "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice" (Matthew 12:7). What God wanted was for people to follow the very heart of his Law, the Torah, as summed up in the two commands to love God above all else (Deut 6:4–6) and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18). Jesus thought that the entire Law was comprised of these two dictates. Those who lived lives of love would enter into God's kingdom, which was soon to appear with the coming of the Son of Man.

The appearance of this kingdom was imminent (Mark 9:1; 13:30; 14:62). There are two ways to explain the urgency in Jesus' message. He was trying to get the people of Israel to repent before the cosmic judge from heaven arrived, destroying all those—even among the Jews—who stood opposed to God. Those who implemented the ethics of the coming Kingdom would get a foretaste on earth of this apocalyptic realm.

Understanding Jesus as an apocalypticist also explains many of the things that he is known to have done. It explains why he was baptized by John. He associated with John, rather than with one of the many other Jewish teachers and leaders (e.g., among the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes), because he subscribed to John's own apocalyptic message: "The ax is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire" (Luke 3:9). It explains why he went up to Jerusalem during the Passover feast. He wanted to bring his message of hope to the heart of Jerusalem, to announce to his fellow Jews gathered together in hopes of God's deliverance that it was soon to come, but that they must

repent in preparation. It explains why he “cleansed” the Temple. He was demonstrating that the coming judge would overthrow all the institutions of power—even the Temple and its sacrificial cult; only those who adhered to Jesus’ forewarning would be safe.

It also explains why Jesus was seen to be such a nuisance that he had to be destroyed. Jesus must have attracted crowds during this tumultuous time in Jerusalem. According to the Gospels, he spent a week in the city before the feast, preaching to those who came to worship in the Temple. He

[Pilate] did to Jesus what he did to two other troublemakers that same morning. He ordered Jesus to be crucified at once. In this case, though, there was a major difference that neither the Jewish leaders nor Pilate could have anticipated.

offended powerful leaders by his actions in the Temple and his dire predictions against it. The leaders were naturally concerned about riots among the people. We know from Josephus of other disastrous riots occurring during Passover during the 1st century.

We also know from Josephus of other prophets who were predicting the end of the age and were arrested as troublemakers. Jesus, then, was

arrested as a troublemaker and handed over to the Roman governor, Pilate. Pilate was concerned with keeping the peace during the incendiary time of the Passover Feast. After a very brief trial, Pilate decided to solve the potential problems caused by Jesus, whom he must have seen as a fanatical religious doomsday preacher, quickly and efficiently. And so, he did to Jesus what he did to two other troublemakers that same morning—and may have done to several others during the course of that week. He ordered Jesus to be crucified at once. In this case, though, there was a major difference that neither the Jewish leaders nor Pilate could have anticipated. In this case, three days after his death, the crucified man was believed to have been restored to life. And that is the beginning of Christianity. ■

Essential Reading

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chaps. 9–13.

———, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 15.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*.

Supplemental Reading

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2.

Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*.

Questions to Consider

1. What evidence strikes you as most convincing that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet, anticipating the end of society as we know it through an intervention of God? How does this view differ from what you've previously understood about Jesus?
2. Does understanding Jesus as an apocalypticist have any bearing on the relevance of Christianity in the modern world?

The Acts of the Apostles

Lecture 13

This is our earliest account of Church history, the earliest account we have of the events that transpired after Jesus' death as Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire.

To this point, we have been considering the Gospels of the New Testament and the life of the historical Jesus; it is now time to move on to Christianity as it developed after Jesus' death. The earliest account we have about the ancient Christian movement is the Book of Acts, which comes from the pen of Luke, author of the third Gospel. We don't know what his real name was, of course. Like the Gospel, the Book of Acts is anonymous. As we have seen, there was an early Christian tradition that Luke was the traveling companion of the apostle Paul. The four "we" passages indicate that the author was close to Paul. Because the Acts cover the spread of Christianity among the Gentiles, the author may have been a Gentile. There was one such Gentile physician named Luke, but many scholars question the validity of that tradition. On the other hand, the author may have had access to other sources. One thing is clear, no matter who wrote the Acts, Paul is the hero of this narrative, the man most responsible for the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman world.

The book's title is a bit of a misnomer. The apostles do not figure prominently in it. The main players are the apostle Peter (chapters 1–12) and the newly converted apostle Paul (chapters 13–28). In another sense, the real player is the Holy Spirit, who is seen directing all the action from behind the scenes.

The Book of Acts is chiefly concerned with the spread of the Christian church after the death of Jesus. Its overall structure and many of its themes are set up in the opening episode (1:1–11). The disciples meet with Jesus after his resurrection, and he instructs them that the end of all things is not yet at hand. They are anxious for the Kingdom of Israel to be restored. They will soon be empowered by the Holy Spirit to be Jesus' witnesses. They are to spread the good news of his death and resurrection throughout the world "in Jerusalem and all Judea, in Samaria, and unto the ends of the earth" (1:8).

The rest of the narrative describes how the apostles came to be empowered by the Holy Spirit and began to multiply by converting nonbelievers—first Jews, then Gentiles—to faith in Jesus, despite numerous obstacles. On the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after Passover, the Holy Spirit descends upon them and enables them to preach the Gospel in foreign tongues (2:5–13) and to do great miracles to validate their message (3:1–10). Masses of people convert at their preaching, many thousands in Jerusalem alone (2:41; 4:4; 5:14). The apostles organize communities of believers who gather together for worship and fellowship and who share all their goods in common (2:43–47). The Jewish leaders try to silence the apostles, to no avail (5:5–22). The Jewish leaders eventually drive the apostles out of Jerusalem. Rather than slowing them down, this accelerates their mission, as they take the gospel to other lands.

The most significant convert is a former persecutor of the Christians, the pharisaically trained and highly influential Saul, also known as Paul. On the way to persecute Christians in the city of Damascus, Paul has a vision of Jesus and becomes an ardent believer (chap. 9). Paul becomes a great missionary to the Gentiles, going on three missionary journeys throughout Syria, Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Macedonia, and Achaia (modern-day Greece). A major conflict emerges in the Christian churches over whether Gentiles (non-Jews) should be required to convert to Judaism (viz., by being circumcised if they are men) before joining the Christian church. At an important conference (chap. 15), Paul's view is endorsed; that is, that salvation comes to all people and circumcision is not necessary. Paul arouses significant opposition among Jews and at their instigation is eventually arrested as a troublemaker (chap. 21). The rest of the narrative (chaps. 21–28) show Paul on trial on various occasions—defending himself as someone who has



Perry-Castañeda Library, University of Texas at Austin.

After his conversion to Christianity, Paul became the faith's best-known missionary.

never renounced Judaism or created any problems for the state; his Roman judges are invariably convinced, but they refuse to release him for fear of the Jewish reaction. Paul is eventually sent to Rome to stand trial before the emperor. The book ends with him in Rome, under house arrest, preaching to everyone who will come to hear him.

Scholars have long recognized reasons for doubting the historical accuracy of aspects of this narrative.

In several places, the same event is narrated more than once, and internal inconsistencies appear (e.g., Paul's conversion in chaps. 9, 22,

and 26: did the bystanders hear the voice but see nothing, or did they hear nothing but see a bright light? Were they left standing or knocked to the ground?). Even more telling, we have the writings of Paul himself, and he often tells a different story from what we find in Acts.

After Paul converted, did he go right to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles (Acts 9) or did he intentionally stay away for three years (Gal. 1)? Was the conference to determine whether Gentiles should be circumcised Paul's third trip there (Acts 15) or his second (Gal. 1)? At this conference, was there widespread agreement (Acts 15) or did Paul have to twist some arms (Gal. 2)? Did Paul think that God had overlooked pagan acts of idolatry because they were committed in ignorance (Acts 17) or did he think that God was wrathful in his judgment against such acts because pagans were fully aware of what they were doing (Romans 1)? For almost every point of comparison, one can find discrepancies between the accounts of Acts and Paul's own writings.

It would be a mistake, though, to discount Acts for this reason. Just as the Gospels are not an attempt to give a disinterested historical sketch of Jesus' life for modern-day scholars, so too Acts is not an attempt to give a disinterested historical sketch of the life of the early Church. Like the

The most significant convert is a former persecutor of the Christians ... Paul. On the way to persecute Christians in the city of Damascus, Paul has a vision of Jesus and becomes an ardent believer.

Gospels, Acts attempts to explain the significance of what happened in early Christianity, not to provide some kind of data-driven report.

The Book of Acts paints the earliest history of Christianity in theological hues. To understand the author's point, we must see what his particular slant on the narrative was. (Notably, many of themes can already be found in the author's first volume.) There are many literary parallels between Luke and Acts. The proclamation of this gospel was made possible by the power of God, through the Holy Spirit. The early Christian evangelists and missionaries were not acting on their own but were empowered from on high. For that reason, their proclamation could not be stopped or even hindered (cf., 5:33–39). This proclamation came first to the Jewish people, many of whom accepted it, but most rejected it. Note that nothing in this proclamation stands contrary to the Jewish religion itself. The rejection of God's salvation by the Jews led to its acceptance by the Gentiles.

The spread of salvation did not happen only geographically (throughout the world) but also ethnically (among all people—Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles). Gentiles, therefore, did not need to be circumcised to receive it. For the author of Acts—in opposition to other early Christians—a Gentile did not have to become a Jew to be a Christian. Moreover, this spread of the church was according to the plan of God. This means that, for this author, God never intended for the end to come right away, even though earlier believers had thought so (based, as we've seen, on the teachings of Jesus himself) (see Acts 1:6–8). The believers who formed the Christian church were in complete internal harmony with one another—there were no major conflicts that could not be resolved easily and harmoniously. Ultimately, it was God who was behind the scene, directing every event that led to the ultimate triumph of Christianity.

These are theological views, not historical data. Historians who want to know what actually happened during the early years of Christianity must approach this text critically, applying rigorous criteria to its narrative, much as they do to the Gospels to uncover the words and teachings of the historical Jesus.

In conclusion, Acts is the first historical sketch we have of the early Christian movement. It traces the spread of the Christian church from Jew

to Gentile, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The major players at the beginning of the narrative are the apostles (especially Peter), but the focus of attention soon shifts to the most significant convert of the Church, the apostle Paul, who is largely responsible for the Christian missions. This book continues many of the themes we found in the Gospel of Luke; it stresses the theological point that the powerful hand of God was at work behind early Christianity, bringing success to its missionaries and peace and harmony among its innumerable converts. The book is not concerned with providing accurate data for modern historians who are interested in the brute facts of the early Christian movement. The book's characters are historical figures, the most significant of whom is the apostle Paul, whose story takes up two-thirds of the book's narrative. In our next lecture, we will turn to Paul himself, to learn about the person that most scholars would agree was the most important figure in the history of Christianity outside of Jesus. ■

Essential Reading

The Book of Acts.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 10.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 9.

Supplemental Reading

Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?*

Questions to Consider

1. If there are reasons for doubting the historical accuracy of Acts, how do you suppose scholars could use it as a historical source for reconstructing the early days of the Christian movement?
2. Discuss the ways that the Book of Acts continues the themes and theological perspectives found in the Gospel of Luke.

Paul—The Man, the Mission, and the *Modus Operandi*

Lecture 14

It is safe to say that Paul was the most significant early convert to Christianity—one who moved from being the greatest persecutor of the faith to being its greatest apostle.

In the last lecture, we saw that the hero of the Book of Acts was the apostle Paul, who more than anyone was responsible for the spread of the Christian movement from its small beginnings in Jerusalem out into the wider Roman world. Most historians would agree with Luke that apart from Jesus, Paul was the most important figure in the history of early Christianity. We now move into a study of Paul himself, based on the letters that happen to survive in the New Testament. These are the *only* works that survive from Paul's hand. In this lecture, we will consider some of the difficulties associated with trying to understand the writings of Paul, then provide some biographical background on his life. The study of Paul is complicated by several difficulties.

As we have already seen, one of the principle sources for knowing about Paul is the Book of Acts, which must be treated critically. In places where Paul and Acts both speak about the same event, discrepancies emerge. Sometimes these are minor (where he was and when and with whom); sometimes, major (what his proclamation to the Gentiles entailed). Moreover, Acts provides some information about Paul that is not corroborated in his letters and must, therefore, be taken gingerly (e.g., that he was a Roman citizen and that he came from Tarsus in the region of Cilicia). How did he proceed on his mission? Acts says he started in the synagogue; in his own writing, Paul does not reflect this.

There are other examples of discrepancies between Acts and Paul's own letters, as well. Some of the writings that appear under Paul's name were probably not written by him. There are a number of Pauline writings outside of the New Testament that are clearly forgeries, as we will see more fully in a later lecture (e.g., "Third" Corinthians). Even in the New Testament,

there are “Pauline” books whose authorship is debated. Most scholars, for example, are convinced that Paul did not write the books of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus (called the “Pastoral” epistles, because they deal with how these pastors should oversee their churches). Scholars continue to dispute whether Paul wrote three other books that claim him as an author: Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians. These books, therefore, are designated the Deutero-Pauline epistles; that is, epistles that have a secondary standing in the Pauline canon. The seven remaining letters—Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon—are designated the “undisputed” Pauline epistles, because virtually everyone agrees that Paul wrote them. Any study of Paul is best served to restrict itself to the letters he is known to have produced.

All of Paul’s letters were “occasional” in nature. These are not systematic treatises on set topics, but letters written to address actual concerns that arose in Paul’s churches. We should not expect these letters to cover every topic of importance to Paul. For example, Paul mentions the “Lord’s Supper” in only one passage, 1 Cor. 11, because the Corinthians were not observing it correctly; if they had been, we never would have known that Paul found its observance to be important.

A careful study of Paul’s letters, with an eye to the Book of Acts for corroboration, reveals several important pieces of biographical information on Paul, which can serve as the backdrop for our study. Paul was born and raised a Jew, committed to the traditions of Pharisaism; he was steeped in and deeply attached to the Law of Moses as given by God (Gal. 1:13–14; Phil. 3:4–6). In fact, Paul is the only surviving Pharisaic author from before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. He seems to have been raised outside of Palestine and evidently did not know Jesus. He spoke and wrote Greek and appears not to have understood the Semitic languages of the region.

For some reason, when he learned about the early Christian movement as an adult, he found it blasphemous and dangerous (Gal. 1:13). He may have shared a traditional view that the messiah was to be a figure of grandeur and power and found that the proclamation that the messiah was a crucified criminal—one who was, therefore, cursed by God (Deut. 27:26; cf., Gal.

3:13)—to be utterly blasphemous. He may have found the Christian claim that salvation came to non-Jews apart from Jewish Law to be completely offensive.

He actively persecuted the Christians (Gal. 1:13). He had some kind of visionary experience of Jesus that changed his life (Gal. 1:15–16; 1 Cor. 15:8). Even though Acts describes the event in some detail (Acts 9, 22, 26), Paul is more elusive. It appears, though, that he had some kind of vision of Jesus (Gal. 1:16; 1 Cor. 15:8). This experience completely transformed his understanding of Jesus. Paul's thought process seems to have worked backward from his conviction that Jesus really was raised from the dead, based on Paul's own vision of him. Rather than being a dead criminal, Jesus was the living Savior. Because God had showered such favor on Jesus after his death, his death must not have been an accident or a mere miscarriage of justice, but the plan of God. Rather than the one who was cursed by God, Jesus was the one man more than any other who was ultimately blessed by God. Because Jesus, as God's blessed one, could not have borne the curse of death for anything he had done, he must have borne it for others. That is to say, Jesus' death was a sacrifice for the sins of others. A person's sins can, therefore, be removed if he or she will accept that sacrifice by faith, or trust in Christ's death for salvation.

Having a right standing before God must come through Christ's death and resurrection, and nothing else. For this reason, the Jewish Law cannot be the way to attain a right standing before God; Jesus' death is the only way. Rather than continuing on as a Pharisee, urging Jews to keep the Law more perfectly and Gentiles to start keeping the Law through being circumcised, Paul came to promote faith in Christ as the way of salvation. There could be no other way: Salvation comes to all people, Jew and Gentile, through the death of Jesus. Thus, Paul became the leading proponent of the view that Gentiles, along with Jews, could belong to the people of God. As a result, he became an influential missionary, taking the message of Christ principally to the Gentiles.

Not only did Paul change his views about Jesus and the way to salvation, he also came to see the significance of Jesus' resurrection for the history of the world. As a Pharisee, Paul already believed in an apocalyptic form

of Judaism. Apocalypticists believed that there would be a resurrection of dead bodies at the end of the age, when all would come to face judgment. Jesus, though, had already been raised. This shows that the end has already begun. Paul refers to Jesus as the “first-fruits” of the resurrection (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:23). He anticipated that the full resurrection would occur soon, within his lifetime (cf., 1 Thess. 4:13–18). That explains, in part, the urgency of his mission to spread the Gospel throughout the world before the end arrived.

Paul’s missionary work resulted from his new-found conviction that only faith in Christ’s death could bring salvation and that people need to prepare for an immediate end of all things. Paul worked in major urban areas through Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia (modern-day Turkey and Greece) to establish communities of Christians. The Book of Acts suggests that he used local synagogues as bases of operation, but Paul himself doesn’t say so. Nor does Paul ever say that he engaged in open-air evangelism or tent revivals.

Convinced that the end of all things was at hand, Paul engaged in an urgent mission to get people to believe in Christ before it was too late.

It appears that Paul met people to preach to by going into a new city, opening up a business, and using it as a point of contact.

Throughout his letters, Paul gives several hints concerning what he said to potential converts. Because his audience consisted of pagans,

he first had to convince them that their worship was pointless, because the pagan gods didn’t really exist (1 Thess. 1:9–10). Moreover, the one true God had sent his son into the world to die for the wrongdoing of which everyone was guilty. The truth of this message was proven by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. For people to have a right standing before God, therefore, and to be saved when the imminent day of judgment arrived, they needed to believe in the one true God and trust the death of his son, Jesus. For Paul, this was the fulfillment of the Jewish Law. It was not necessary, though, to follow the Jewish Law to achieve salvation.

Paul’s conversion appears to have been based on some vision of Jesus after his death, a vision that completely altered Paul’s understanding of Jesus, the plan of God, the way of salvation, and the role of the Law that God

had given to his people Israel. Convinced that the end of all things was at hand, Paul engaged in an urgent mission to get people to believe in Christ before it was too late. The undisputed writings from Paul's hand are letters that he wrote to some of the churches he established after he had moved on to other areas for further missionary work. Problems inevitably arose in these communities after Paul, their founder, had left them, and he wrote to help them deal with these problems. These letters are the earliest Christian writings we have, produced mostly in the 50s, 16 or 20 years before the first Gospel. Starting with the next lecture, we'll begin to look at some of these letters to unpack further the teachings of the most significant figure in the history of early Christianity. ■

Essential Reading

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap.16.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 18.

Supplemental Reading

Fitsmyer, *Pauline Theology*.

Keck, *Paul and His Letters*.

Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*.

Questions to Consider

1. From what we've seen so far, in what ways did Paul's belief in the resurrection confirm what he already thought and in what ways did it alter what he thought? To what extent can it be said that Paul "changed his mind"?
2. Paul indicates that a Gentile does not have to become a Jew to be a Christian, but he does not press this further to say that a Jew should *stop* being a Jew to be a Christian. What do people in the modern world think about this? Is it possible to be both Jewish and Christian?

Paul and the Crises of His Churches— First Corinthians

Lecture 15

Paul's theological belief in Christ's death and resurrection has clear ethical implications for the life of believers.

The surviving Pauline letters are addressed, for the most part, to churches established by Paul in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia. They were written by the apostle to his converts to help them deal with problems that had arisen in their communities since his departure. The letter of 1 Corinthians is a fairly representative example of these Pauline epistles. We know both from Paul's letters and Acts that Paul spent a good deal of time in Corinth trying to establish a community of Christians there. The city is located on the isthmus dividing the northern and southern parts of modern-day Greece; Paul went there after establishing a church in nearby Thessalonica. According to Acts, Paul spent 18 months in Corinth, converting people and teaching those he had converted. Acts indicates that he began his work in the synagogue and converted mainly Jews (18:4–11), but 1 Corinthians suggests that the community was made up of former pagans (12:2).

Paul's message to them, as he himself indicates in the letter, was similar to what we saw in the previous lecture (see 1 Cor. 15:3–5): Pagan idols are dead; there is only one true God. Christ, his son, died for the sins of the world, in accordance with the prophecies of the Jewish Scriptures. (Because the Hebrew Scriptures did not prophecy the suffering and death of the messiah, we are not sure what passages Paul is adducing to make this point.) God raised Christ from the dead, again as a fulfillment of Scriptures. Large numbers of people saw him alive afterwards, including the apostles, 500 people at one time, and Paul himself. Those who want a right standing before God must believe in Christ; those who do so will be given an entirely new life.

After Paul and his co-workers had converted a large number of people, organized their church, and taught them the rudiments of the faith, they left for other missionary areas to start all over again.

After his departure, Paul learned of significant problems that had arisen in the Corinthian Church. Some of the members had written a letter to him asking his opinion about some pressing theological and practical matters (see 1 Cor. 7:1). He was also visited by several members of the congregation (“Chloe’s people”) who gave him the lowdown on the church, and the news was not good (1 Cor. 1:11). 1 Corinthians itself provides a sense of the magnitude of the problems. There were major divisions in the church at Corinth. Different church leaders were claiming to be more spiritually knowledgeable and powerful than others and were creating factions in the church (chaps. 1–4), claiming to follow Paul or other leaders. Some members of the church took others to court (chap. 6).

There were disputes about important ethical issues. Some were claiming that sex was wrong, even in the confines of marriage (chap. 7). Others hotly debated whether meat that had come from pagan sacrifices could be eaten in good conscience by Christians (chaps. 8–10). There were instances of flagrant immorality. Some men in the church were visiting prostitutes and seemed proud of it (chap. 6). One man was sleeping with his stepmother (chap. 5).

And finally there were problems in the worship services. There were abuses of the communal meal; some members were gorging themselves and getting drunk while others had nothing to eat or drink (chap. 11). There was chaos during worship as people tried to demonstrate their spiritual superiority over one another by disruptively “speaking in tongues” (i.e., speaking in foreign languages they didn’t know, under the inspiration of the spirit) (chaps. 12–14).

Even though Paul dealt with these problems one by one, his response to the Corinthian situation doesn’t fully make sense until the very end of the letter, where he deals with the one major problem that has generated all the others: some of the Corinthians don’t appear to understand the nature of the future resurrection. Paul had taught them that Christ had been raised from the dead

and that by believing in him, people could be given a new life through a right standing with God. For Paul, this meant that believers would be saved when Jesus returned and all people were raised from the dead for reward or punishment, in eternal bodies that couldn't die, like the resurrected body of Jesus. Paul, in other words, taught an apocalyptic view of the faith.

Some of the Corinthians had taken this teaching a step further and in a different direction. For them, the new life available now in Christ was *already* a glorified resurrected existence. Life in the present was an exalted kind of existence above the mundane concerns and realities of life. Bodily existence didn't really matter, because the body had been transcended by those who were related to Christ. True believers had thus already begun to experience the full effects of salvation. And those who were truly spiritual were the ones who had most fully transcended this material world and its mundane concerns and realities. Some historians have seen this Corinthian view as a forerunner of Gnosticism, with its belief that this material world was evil but that it could not ultimately affect the divine spark within that had already acquired the knowledge of salvation.

Paul saw this as the key to all the other problems, and he deals with it last, in his famous chapter on the resurrection, 1 Corinthians 15. Paul begins by establishing common ground with the Corinthians: They began to believe in Christ when they put their faith in his death and resurrection (15:3–4). But Jesus' resurrection was not merely a spiritual resurrection: It was a physical one. He was actually seen, bodily, after he arose (15:5–8). This is the key point of the chapter. This means that the Christians' resurrection—if it's going to be like Christ's—is also going to be a *physical* resurrection. Because it's going to be a physical resurrection, it obviously hasn't happened yet. Christians are *not* already experiencing the full benefits of salvation; these will come only at the end, when Christ returns, raises the dead, and brings immortality to those who are living. Paul's teaching here reflects what he says in other passages of his letters, including the intriguing words of 1 Thess. 4:13–18, used by some conservative groups still today to refer to the coming "rapture" (even though the term does not occur in the passage).

Each of the problems the Corinthians have is related in some sense to their failure to understand the nature of this future resurrection. For example:

The divisions in the church have occurred because some leaders have tried to “prove” their superiority, that they have heavenly wisdom and power. Paul doesn’t take a side in the dispute—because all sides have erred in thinking that full spiritual wisdom and power have already come in this age. In fact, God has shown that power and wisdom have no role in salvation; paradoxically, God now works through what appears to be weak and foolish (as seen in the cross of Jesus, the make-up of the Corinthians’ congregation; and Paul’s own ministry itself (1 Cor. 1:18–2:5). The immoral activities of some of the members are the result of their belief that they have transcended the physical realities of this world. For them, because the body is irrelevant (in that it’s been transcended), people can do whatever they want with their bodies (such as using prostitutes with impunity). For Paul, though, the fact that God will raise the body from the dead shows that God is concerned about what people do with their bodies.

In short, the numerous problems that emerged in the Corinthian church—church divisions, rampant immorality, chaotic church organization—are all related in one way or another to a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of salvation. The resurrection of Christians, for Paul, is a future event with serious implications for the present. To adhere to the will of God, Christians must understand the nature of life in the present. This is not an age—even for believers—of glory and grandeur; it is an age of weakness and suffering. Not until Christ returns will Christians enjoy the full benefits of salvation. In the meantime, they must lead humble and moral lives, working for harmony together and setting a good example for those who are outside the community. ■

Essential Reading

1 Corinthians.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 22.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 20.

Supplemental Reading

Roetzel, *Paul and His Letters*.

Questions to Consider

1. How does Paul's belief in the future, bodily resurrection of believers relate to forms of Christianity that are prevalent in our world? Is it any longer a central conviction of most Christians? If not, why not?
2. Try to explain how each of the problems that Paul discusses in 1 Corinthians can be tied into a different understanding of the nature of the resurrection.

Pauline Ethics

Lecture 16

Paul had become convinced that it was Christ's death, not the Jewish Law, that put a person into a right relationship with God. He therefore argued that keeping the Law had no bearing on one's salvation.

The problem of Christian ethics was a very real one for Paul, because some of his enemies accused him of advocating lawless behavior. The charge was rooted in Paul's theology of salvation by faith in Christ, apart from the Law. Paul argued that keeping the Jewish Law had no bearing on one's salvation. His opponents took that to mean that Paul urged lawlessness (Rom. 3:8).

Paul did not see it this way and spent a good deal of effort trying to explain both how salvation came apart from keeping God's Law and yet how salvation involved keeping God's Law. It was true that doing what God had commanded in the Law would not be enough to put one in a right standing before God (Rom. 3:20; Gal. 2:15–16). But for Paul, one who had a right standing before God would nonetheless follow the Law (Rom. 13:8–10). This is very clear in his letter to the Galatians.

Paul based many of his moral judgments on the view (which as a Jew no doubt struck him as uncontroversial) that the Law of Moses—in its ethical requirements—should be followed. It is quite true that for Paul, a person did not have to become a Jew to be saved. This is why he was opposed to Gentiles taking up Jewish ways—by being circumcised and keeping kosher, for example (Gal. 5:2–3). In fact, he argued in the angry letter to the Galatians that anyone who did so was in danger of losing their salvation, because doing so would imply that Christ's death was not sufficient for salvation but that keeping the Law was also required (Gal. 5:4).

But Paul nonetheless taught that the *ethical* requirements of the Law should be followed (e.g., the commands not to murder or commit adultery and the command to love your neighbor as yourself). This has caused a good deal of confusion for Paul's interpreters over the years. Paul never explains clearly

why he thinks some laws are not to be followed (circumcision) but others are (don't commit adultery). It appears that there was some kind of "common sense" distinction for him between laws meant just for Jews to preserve their Jewish identity (ceremonial laws) and laws meant for everyone who wanted to worship the God of Israel (ethical laws).

The one law from Scripture that Paul particularly stressed was Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In both Galatians and Romans, Paul claims that believers in Christ must follow this rule of love, because by doing so they would "fulfill the Law" (Gal. 5:14). In 1 Corinthians, in particular, he applies the "love commandment" to show how people ought to behave; one of the most famous passages of the New Testament is 1 Corinthians 13—the "love" chapter. What most readers overlook is the context of the passage: It comes right in the middle of Paul's discussion of how spiritual gifts are to be used in the church. This context is significant for our understanding of the chapter.

The one law from Scripture that Paul particularly stressed was Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul believed that Christians were living in an interim period between the beginning of the end of all things, with the resurrection of Jesus, and the culmination of the end, with his return in judgment. In this interim period, God provided believers in Christ with the Holy Spirit, as a kind of foreshadowing of what it would be like in the future kingdom. The Spirit was received by a person at baptism and endowed the person with a gift that was to assist the community in its life together, here during this interim period before the end. Different people had different gifts (the Greek term is *charismata*; hence, these are called "charismatic" communities): Some were leaders, others were administrators, others were teachers, others were healers. Some could speak God's word through prophecies from on high, others spoke God's word in unknown tongues, and yet others could interpret these tongues (1 Cor. 12:1–11). These gifts, in Paul's view, were for the good of the whole community. The Corinthians who believed themselves most spiritual maintained that they were especially endowed with the ability to speak in tongues, a most spectacular gift, and were disrupting the worship

services by trying to prove it. A good bit of chaos resulted. In 1 Corinthians 12–14, Paul deals with the problem and lays down some rules: Only two or three should speak in tongues at any service, in turns; only if an interpreter is present; and so on. But in the midst of the discussion, he deals with what is really wrong with the situation in Corinth. Those trying to exalt themselves through manifesting this gift fail to understand that the gifts are given for the sake of the community and are to be practiced out of love for others, not the desire to elevate oneself. And so, he speaks his famous words of 1 Cor. 13:1–13: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a clanging gong or a crashing cymbal...” His mention of tongues, prophecies, and knowledge relate directly to the problems of the Corinthian Church.

For Paul, the love commandment was flexible; it could be applied to new situations to determine how believers should live. It applied to obvious problems of personal relationships—such as whether you should defraud your brother or sister (1 Thess. 4). It also applied to less obvious problems of communal relationships—such as whether you should eat meat that had been sacrificed to a pagan deity (1 Cor. 8). His solution to this is very interesting, but can be related to the “love” commandment.

Paul did have other criteria of behavior, including some rooted directly in his apocalyptic theology. Paul’s apocalyptic expectation of the end had a radical impact on such areas as his views of marriage and slavery. Because the end was near, one should not change one’s social standing (1 Cor. 7). Slaves should not seek to be set free. People who were single should not get married. A person married to an unbeliever should not seek to be divorced.

Even though Paul taught that salvation came apart from the Law, he did not urge lawless behavior. In fact, Paul insisted on the morality of his congregations and applied a number of criteria to ethical situations to determine what the proper mode of behavior was. The ethical injunctions of Scripture were to be followed—especially the command to love one another as oneself. The apocalyptic realities of this world were to affect how one lived one’s life. Paul’s ethics are ultimately rooted in his understanding of God’s act of salvation in Christ. In the next lecture, we will look at Paul’s fullest exposition of his doctrine of salvation, as found in his letter to the Romans. ■

Essential Reading

1 Corinthians.

Galatians.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 20.

Supplemental Reading

Furnish, *The Love Commandment in the New Testament*.

Schrage, *New Testament Ethics for Today*.

Questions to Consider

1. Paul placed a huge emphasis on the love commandment, to “love one’s neighbor as oneself.” Can you think of ethical issues in the modern world that are difficult to resolve simply on the basis of this commandment? What other ethical criteria can be adduced to direct behavior today?
2. How do you imagine Paul’s ethical stands would have been affected if he realized that the end of the age was not imminent, but that the world would go on existing for thousands of years?

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Lecture 17

By all counts, Romans has a unique position among the Pauline epistles. The letter indicates that Paul was *not* the founder of the church in Rome and that he had never even visited it.

The letter does not appear, at least on the surface, to be directed to any problems found in the Roman church; when it does deal with ethical or theological issues, it does so abstractly—not in direct response to a situation in the congregation. Instead of addressing the needs of the Roman church per se, Paul uses the letter to explain at great length his understanding of the Christian gospel, emphasizing in particular his view that salvation comes to all people—Jew and Gentile equally—through faith in Christ, apart from doing the works of the Law. His reasons for developing his views at such length to a church he had never visited are never stated, but may be inferred from some of the things he says in the course of the letter. Paul indicates that he is about to travel to Jerusalem and he is concerned about his reception among “Jewish-Christians” there, who are suspicious of his “Law-free” gospel (15:25–31). He may be developing his views about the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in Christ as a trial run for his trip. Paul also indicates that he will be starting a mission to the West and suggests that he would like to use the Roman church as a base of operations (1:10–15). Given the misperceptions that some people in the Roman community have about his gospel (e.g., 3:8), he may be using the letter to assure his readers that his mission is worthy of their support.

Whatever the precise reason for the letter, it's clear that Romans provides the most systematic exposition of Paul's understanding of God's work of salvation through Christ. We have already seen some of the basic features of Paul's understanding of the importance of Christ as the way to salvation. In Romans, we find the clearest development of Paul's theological reflections.

A close reading of Romans indicates that Paul has different ways of conceptualizing how God used Christ's death to bring salvation; that is to say, Paul has different conceptual “models” for salvation. The model Paul

most commonly uses understands salvation in legal or judicial terms. The judicial model imagines salvation to be comparable to a legal procedure. God is likened to a cosmic lawgiver, who has given his Laws for people to follow (all people, not just Jews). God is also the judge who enacts punishment for the violation of his laws; unfortunately, everyone has broken them, in one way or another (i.e., they've committed acts of transgression, or sins, against God's Law). As a result, everyone

Paul has different ways of conceptualizing how God used Christ's death to bring salvation; that is to say, Paul has different conceptual "models" for salvation.

falls under the judgment of the court, and the penalty for breaking God's Laws is death. But according to this model, Christ is one who does not deserve death, because he has not violated any of God's Laws. Christ's death, then, is not to pay a penalty that he owes but to pay the penalty for others. God shows that he accepts the payment of this

penalty by raising Jesus from the dead. Humans can avail themselves of this payment of their debt simply by trusting that God will find Christ's death adequate; the only alternative is to pay the penalty themselves. Those who trustingly accept Christ's death as a payment for their sins (i.e., who have "faith" in Christ's death) are treated as if they are "not guilty" by the court (even though, in fact, they're completely guilty); that is, they are "justified" (put into a right standing with God).

This model is commonly called Paul's "doctrine of justification by faith apart from the Law." The term "justification" in Greek comes from the same root as the word "rightness." It refers to the act of God in which he puts someone into a "right" relationship with himself. According to this model, the human problem of sin cannot be solved by trying to keep the Jewish Law. Both Jews and Gentiles have violated the law in one way or another, even religious Jews who do their best. All stand under the same penalty of death and, therefore, all must be saved from death in the same way. The Law can't bring about salvation because the Law is what brings condemnation. Paul says that God is righteous and that people can be made "right" with God by faith. Paul then launches into the human dilemma, that is, the sinful nature of mankind (whether Jew, Christian, or pagan). Thus, everyone is under the power of

sin (3:9) and, therefore, under God's condemnation. But God has a solution (3:21–26). He has acted on mankind's behalf by having Christ die for them in an act of unmerited favor. Jesus' sacrifice is an atonement for sin and proof of God's righteousness. Paul sees this notion of justification by faith apart from the Law to be taught by the Law itself, particularly in the stories of the father of the Jews, Abraham, who was "justified" by God on the basis of his faith well before he had been circumcised (Romans 4, quoting Gen. 15:6).

We can see from the Letter to the Romans that Paul does not always think of salvation in judicial terms. Consider, for example, what Paul says about "sin." Clearly, for Paul "sin" is more than an act of disobedience to God. Sin is in the world (5:13); sin rules people (5:21); people can serve sin (6:6); people can be enslaved to sin (6:17); people can die to sin (6:11); and people can be freed from sin (6:18). Rather than an act of disobedience, sin is conceived in an apocalyptic way, as a kind of demonic power that is in the world and trying to enslave people to do its will. Paul speaks of "death" in similar ways—as an evil force opposed to God that can enslave his people. Thus, Paul sometimes conceives of the act of salvation not in legal but in apocalyptic terms. We can call this mode of conceptualization Paul's "participationist" view of salvation. The participationist view contains many surface similarities to the judicial: The problem is thought of as "sin"; sin leads to death; and the solution to the human problem is Christ's death and resurrection. But the meanings of these terms and the way the model works are completely different.

In this model, sin is a cosmic power that enslaves people. Everyone is enslaved to this power, and no one can escape. Christ, though, escaped this power. Evidence is provided by the resurrection. Because Christ defeated the power of death, he must also have defeated the concomitant power of sin. People can escape the power of sin by participating in Christ's victory, which occurs by being united with Christ in his death. This happens when a person is baptized. Therefore, those who have been baptized into Christ have escaped the nefarious powers of sin and death and are freed for eternal life.

It may be useful to compare and contrast these two conceptual models of salvation (i.e., judicial and participationist). In one, sin is an act of disobedience; in the other, it is an evil cosmic power. In one, the human

problem is the penalty of death that comes through violation of God's Law; in the other, the problem is enslavement to an alien power. In one, the divine solution is for Christ to pay the penalty that humans owe; in the other, the solution is for Christ to break the enslaving power of death to bring liberation. In one, salvation comes by means of a trusting acceptance that Christ's death has paid the penalty; in the other, it comes by participating in Christ's victory by being united with him in baptism.

Paul did not see these models as being at odds with one another. He never explicitly lays out his models or explains their similarities or differences. Rather, the models are presupposed throughout the letter and Paul's other writings. The models appear to interact closely with one another in Paul's mind. Why is everyone guilty before God? Because they have all sinned through acts of transgression (the judicial model; 3:23). Why has everyone sinned? Because all are under the alien power of sin (the participationist model; 3:9). Why is everyone under the alien power of sin? Because the first man, Adam, committed an act of disobedience (judicial model) that allowed the power of sin to enter the world (participationist model; 5:12). And so on.

As Paul himself saw, both models have profound implications for understanding the nature of Judaism—because both insist that it is only by Christ's death and resurrection that God brings salvation. Paul then needs to deal with the question of whether God has “changed the rules” or, even worse, whether he has rescinded his eternal covenant with Israel. In Romans 9–11, Paul deals with these thorny issues and argues that God is faithful and has not gone back on his promises—even though his own people have rejected him when they rejected the messiah. Still, bringing the Gentiles into the people of God is all part of the divine plan for all people—Jew and Gentile—to be saved. ■

Essential Reading

Romans.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 24.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 21.

Supplemental Reading

Donfried, *The Romans Debate*.

Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*.

Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans*.

Questions to Consider

1. Summarize the judicial and participationist models of salvation. Are there points at which these models appear to be at odds with one another?
2. What other conceptual models can you imagine as a way of presenting the importance of Christ's death for salvation? How, for example, would a model look that was based on viewing Christ's death as a "purchase" of people? Or a "reconciliation" between warring factions?

Paul, Jesus, and James

Lecture 18

On the one hand, there are broad ranging similarities between Jesus and Paul that you would expect from two 1st century apocalyptic Jews. On the other hand, there are also a number of striking differences between the two.

Now that we have nearly completed our study of Jesus and Paul, the two most important figures of early Christianity, it might be useful to take a step back and compare what we've discovered. That will be the goal of this lecture. We will compare and contrast the teachings of these two men, to see whether they are completely compatible—as most people who haven't given the matter a good deal of thought probably assume—or whether, instead, they stand at odds with one another in some of their key ideas. After making that comparison, we'll compare Paul's writings with one other book of the New Testament, the epistle of James, which has been thought by some, since the 16th century, to stand in direct opposition to Paul's teaching of justification by faith apart from works. The overarching question that these comparisons—indeed, that this entire course—is trying to answer is whether early Christianity was one solid monolith or extremely diverse, whether it was one thing or lots of things, whether there was, in fact, one early Christianity or several early Christianities.

It is interesting to compare the fundamental teachings of Jesus and Paul on a point-by-point basis. We are presupposing that we have reconstructed what the historical Jesus taught. As you might expect, there are a number of striking similarities. Both men were 1st-century Jews who, like most Jews, believed in the one God, the creator of all, who had made a covenant with the people Israel and given them his Law. Both were apocalypticists, who thought the end of history was imminent, to be brought in a cataclysmic judgment by a cosmic judge from heaven. Both taught that people needed to prepare for this coming climax of history. Both taught that keeping the letter of the Law would have no effect on one's standing before God and that the Law could be summed up in the command to love one's neighbor as oneself.

There are also a number of striking differences between the two. The historical Jesus (i.e., the man himself, not the Jesus as portrayed in one or the other of the Gospels) taught that the cosmic judge coming from heaven was someone that he called the Son of Man, and this Son of Man was not Jesus himself. Paul taught that the cosmic judge was Jesus. Jesus taught that to escape judgment, a person must keep the central teachings of the Jewish Law, as he himself interpreted them. Paul never mentioned Jesus' interpretations of the Law and insisted that keeping the Law would never bring salvation; the only way to be saved was to trust Jesus' death and resurrection. Jesus saw his own importance as lying in his proclamation of the coming end and his interpretation of the Law. Paul saw Jesus' importance as lying exclusively in his death and resurrection for sins.

A passage from Matthew (25:31–46) will help us explore these differences. Jesus speaks of the cosmic judge (“the Son of Man”) in a passage that probably goes back to the historical Jesus. Salvation comes by loving others and doing good things (cf., Leviticus 19:18), not through Jesus or belief in him. In both Romans 3 and Galatians 3, Paul says just the opposite: Justification is through faith in Christ, not through works of the Law. How does one account for these differences? The traditional view of the difference is that Jesus was teaching *before* his death and resurrection and Paul was teaching *afterwards* and that Jesus could not have emphasized his death and resurrection before they occurred.

Some interpreters question this view. Why would Jesus teach people that they could enter God's Kingdom by keeping his Law if it simply wasn't true? An alternative view is that Paul represents a significant development of Jesus' teachings, that he altered the basic message in light of his experience of Jesus' resurrection, making Jesus' death, rather than his proclamation, the key point of the message. According to this view, Paul transformed the religion *of* Jesus into a religion *about* Jesus. Many scholars today think this view is too simplistic and that perhaps Paul is not quite the innovator that earlier scholars thought he was. It is striking in this connection that Paul rarely talks about the religion that Jesus himself propounded and rarely mentions anything that Jesus said or did. Are the two men talking about the same religion?

This raises the interesting point of whether Paul actually knew what Jesus had said and done during his life. It's important to remember that Paul was living and writing before the Gospels were produced. We shouldn't assume, therefore, that he knew what was going to be written in them. If we were to read just Paul's letters, how much information about Jesus' life would we be able to learn from them? That is, how much do we know that Paul knew about Jesus? There's not a lot of information there. The following list is fairly complete:

1. Jesus was born of a woman (Gal. 4:4).
2. He was born Jewish (Gal. 4:4).
3. He was reputedly from the line of King David (Rom 1:3).
4. He had brothers, one of whom was named James (1 Cor. 5:9; Gal. 1:19).
5. His ministry was among Jews (Rom 15:8).
6. He had 12 disciples (1 Cor. 15:5).
7. He had a last meal with his disciples, in which he instituted the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–25).
8. He was betrayed (1 Cor. 11:23).
9. He was crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).
10. He taught that his followers should not be divorced (1 Cor. 7:11) and that they should pay their ministers (1 Cor. 9:14).

Think of the things about Jesus we wouldn't know if this were all the material we had. How does one account for the paucity of this material? Maybe Paul knew a good deal more about Jesus but, given the occasional nature of his letters, had no reason to provide more information. He did know some of Jesus' disciples, after all. On the other hand, Paul constantly reminds his readers what he taught them: Why didn't he ever remind them what Jesus taught? On rare occasions, he does cite Jesus as an authority for his views; if he knew more about what Jesus said, why would he not cite him more often? Maybe Paul knew a good deal more about Jesus, but considered that information irrelevant for his own mission. He does say, after all, to the Corinthians, "I knew nothing when I was among you except Christ, and him crucified" (i.e., he didn't "know" or "teach" anything other than the importance of Jesus' death). Could Paul have had a view precisely opposite that of the Gospel of Thomas, for whom only the words of Jesus, not his

death and resurrection, were what mattered for salvation? Maybe Paul did not know much more than he mentioned. Could it be that the death and resurrection of Jesus were of such earth-shattering importance to Paul that he didn't even inquire into what Jesus said and did while he was alive? Scholars continue to debate this question, and there does not appear to be any clear-cut answer.

It may also be fruitful to compare Paul, not just with the one who came before him, Jesus, but also with one who came after him, James. The epistle of James is commonly attributed to Jesus' own brother. The author does claim to be someone named James, but he does not claim to be a personal relation to Jesus. James was a common name in the ancient world. We aren't sure, therefore, who wrote the letter, except to say that unlike Jesus' brother James, who would have been a lower-class Aramaic-speaking peasant, this epistle is written by a well-educated Greek-speaking Christian.

The book consists of a number of moral exhortations for its readers to behave in ways appropriate to their faith. Many of the exhortations sound very similar to Jesus' own teachings, for example, from the Sermon on the Mount. One passage in particular has given readers pause over the years, James 2:14-26. The passage seems to stand in stark contrast to what Paul teaches, for example, in the Book of Romans. James indicates that a person "is justified by works, not by faith alone." Contrast Rom. 3:28: "a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law." Interestingly, just as Paul in Romans uses the father of the Jews, Abraham, as proof that justification comes by faith alone (Rom. 4:2, 22), James uses him to show that a person is justified only by doing works (2:21). Both even quote the same verse from the Old Testament, Gen. 15:6, to support their views: "And Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness."

We have seen a good deal of diversity in early Christianity. The different Gospels have different portrayals of Jesus and there appear to be discrepancies among them.

How does one explain these differences? Some people would argue that James has heard the teaching of Paul, that a person is justified only by faith in Christ apart from doing what the Law demands, and wants to provide a corrective. In addition to faith, one must lead a life that is ethical. Other people would point out that this perspective is not so far off from what Paul taught, because he did require his converts to follow strict codes of conduct. Again, though, interpreters continue to debate whether these two authors stand at odds with one another.

We have seen a good deal of diversity in early Christianity. The different Gospels have different portrayals of Jesus and there appear to be discrepancies among them. Jesus himself preached a message that was altered before being written into the Gospels. In his own proclamation, Jesus saw the imminent intervention of God in the affairs of the world, through the appearance of the Son of Man in judgment. Paul's message appears to be different, based on his view that salvation comes, not through faithful obedience to the Law of God, but through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection. As we continue our discussions of the New Testament, we will see even more diversity. Some of this diversity can be found in books that claim Paul as their author but that seem to present a different understanding of the Gospel than his. That will be the subject of our next lecture. ■

Essential Reading

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 34.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap 22.

Furnish, *Jesus According to Paul*.

Supplemental Reading

Wenham, *Paul and Jesus*.

Questions to Consider

1. Consider each of the possible explanations in this lecture for why Paul does not mention more about Jesus' life; work out a list of arguments both for and against each explanation. When you look at them closely, which view strikes you as the most plausible? Can you think of other options?
2. If Paul and Jesus represent different understandings of salvation, can they really be said to have subscribed to the same religion? Put differently, is it historically right to say that Jesus was a Christian?

The Deutero-Pauline Epistles

Lecture 19

The New Testament epistles that claim to be written by Paul but that in the judgment of a majority of modern scholars probably were not.

We are now moving into a different, but equally disputed, area of scholarship—the New Testament epistles that claim to be written by Paul but that, in the judgment of most modern scholars, probably were not. The first group of these letters, the so-called Deutero- (or secondary-) Pauline epistles, are so named because, as disputed epistles, they have a secondary standing in the Pauline corpus. We need to start by discussing the issue of pseudonymity in the ancient world. The term *pseudonym* simply means “false name.” A pseudonymous writing is one that is written under a name other than the author’s. Sometimes this simply involves the use of a *pen name*, as when Samuel Clemens wrote under the name Mark Twain or Mary Ann Evans wrote as George Eliot. Sometimes, though, it involves a deliberate act of deception or forgery, in which an author for one reason or another claims to be someone else, as happened some years ago when journals forged under the name of Adolf Hitler turned up.

Forgery was a relatively common practice in the ancient world. There were no copyright laws in antiquity and, because books could not be mass produced, it was difficult for most people to compare a book in hand with other books by the same author to see whether they were basically similar in vocabulary and style. Most people couldn’t read. Taking Athens in the 5th century B.C. as an example, the literacy rate was, at most, only 10 to 15 percent. We know that forgery was common because the ancients talked about it. One famous author from the 2nd century A.D., the Roman physician Galen, actually found a forgery in his name at a local bookshop and wrote a book on how to recognize books actually written by Galen! Sometimes forgers were caught in the act, as happened with a Christian who forged a *third* letter of Paul to the Corinthians and, according to 3rd-century Church Father Tertullian, was found out.

Why did people forge writings in the name of famous authors? Sometimes there was a profit motive. If a new library was paying gold on the head for original works of important authors, you'd be amazed how many original works began to turn up. In the philosophical schools, there was a completely different reason. Some students felt that all they thought and understood was directly the result of their studying under their revered teachers. When writing their own treatises, then, they would sign their teachers' names as an act of gratitude and modesty. Probably the most common reason for forgery, though, was to get an audience for your writing. If you wanted your philosophical views heard and wrote a treatise using your own name (Marcus Aristides, or whatever), no one might read it, but if you signed it Plato, you might have a chance. This final motive is not necessarily wicked. It may well be that forgers thought that what they wrote would have been completely approved by the author they ascribed it to. If he only had a chance to address the issue, this is what he himself would have said. This seems to be the case in the forged 3 Corinthians.

Forgers used a variety of techniques to hide the traces of their deceit. Simply to claim to be someone carried a lot of weight, especially for religious texts, in which you naturally wouldn't expect an author to fib. The main trick was to make sure that nothing in the writing would tip one's hand. Forgers would typically try to imitate the style of the author they were claiming to be, use his vocabulary, and imitate some of his better known turns of phrase. The forgers also added elements of verisimilitude, such as off-the-cuff remarks that make it sound as if something has just occurred to the alleged author or even an emphatic insistence that he really is the author. One of the most interesting instances of the latter occurs in a Christian book of the 4th century, called the *Apostolic Constitutions*. The book claims to be written by Jesus' apostles immediately after the resurrection (even though it reflects knowledge of much later Christianity); in it, the author warns readers *not* to read books that falsely claim to be written by the apostles!

Forgers used a variety of techniques to hide the traces of their deceit.

We know that there were a number of forgeries in Paul's name. Third Corinthians, mentioned above, is one obvious example. There is also forged correspondence between Paul and the most famous Roman philosopher of his day, Seneca, an advisor to the emperor Nero, in which Seneca praises Paul for being one of the greatest minds of his day. The question, then, is not whether Christians would have forged documents in Paul's name; it's whether any of these pseudonymous works made into the New Testament. The canon was determined long after the works were written.

Many scholars continue to be persuaded that the Deutero-Pauline epistles of 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians are all pseudonymous. As with all pseudonymous writings, the debates center on whether the books are so unlike the books that are known to come from the hand of an author—for example in vocabulary, writing style, and theological perspective—that they could not have been written by him. With respect to 2 Thessalonians, many scholars continue to think that its emphasis that the end of the age is *not* imminent (2 Thess. 2:2–13) does not sound like Paul's eschatology, as seen in 1 Thessalonians, where he warns that the end-time could arrive at any moment, like a thief in the night (1 Thess. 4:13–5:10). With respect to Colossians, most scholars find that its emphasis that Christians have not only died with Christ but have already been raised with him to experience an exalted, glorified existence (2:12; 3:1) contradicts what he says in 1 Corinthians, where he argues precisely *against* such a view. These two books are particularly debated among scholars. You can read further about these debates in the readings I've suggested.

With Ephesians, there is less debate. Most critical scholars are fairly persuaded that Paul did not write it. The overall purpose of this letter is to remind Gentile readers that even though they were formerly alienated from God and his people Israel, they have now been made one through the work of Christ—one with the Jews through Christ's work of reconciliation and one with God through Christ's work of redemption. The first half of the letter explains how Jew and Gentile have been united and how both have been made one with God, all through Christ. The second half contains numerous exhortations to live in ways that manifest this unity. As you'll see by reading this letter, it is a powerful and eloquent statement of the meaning of Christ's

work and the need to live moral lives in light of it. At the same time, the question remains: Did Paul write it?

The first reason for thinking that Ephesians is pseudonymous is its distinctive vocabulary. This short book of only six chapters uses a total of 116 words not found in any of Paul's undisputed letters—an inordinate number when compared with other books. Corroborating evidence is found in the style of the author's Greek writing—usually a matter of unconscious habit. Whereas Paul tends to write very short choppy sentences in Greek, this author writes very long, convoluted sentences (it's hard to tell this just from the English) that are not characteristic of Paul's known writings. Most significant, though, is the substance of what this author says. This is a complicated criterion, because the author often says things that sound very much like Paul—as you would expect from someone who wants his readers to think he is Paul. But what this author says about himself is curious. Paul was proud of his Jewish upbringing and claimed that he knew the Law could not bring salvation precisely because he himself had stringently followed it: “According to the righteousness found in the Law, I was blameless” (Phil. 3:6). Not so this author, who admits that he had previously lived an immoral life as a pagan, “in the passions of the flesh, following its desires and senses.” What he says about Christians is even more curious. Paul insisted to the Corinthians that they had not yet been resurrected with Christ, spiritually raised to a new existence in heaven, but that's precisely what the author of this book does claim: “God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places” (2:5-6). For Paul, Christians have not been exalted to a new, glorified existence, but for this author, they have. It's a fundamental difference. In fact, the view advanced here in Ephesians appears to be closely related to the one that Paul attacks in Corinthians. Was Ephesians written by Paul, then? There is still debate, but most critical scholars think not. If it was not written by Paul, then it was likely written by a follower after Paul's death.

We have seen, very briefly, several of the reasons that scholars doubt the Pauline authorship of 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians. These judgments are principally based on questions of vocabulary, writing style, and theology. It's possible, of course, that Paul simply adopted a different vocabulary, writing style, and theology when writing these letters. In that

case, then, one could say that they were written by Paul but by a different Paul than the one who wrote the undisputed letters. As we'll see in the next lecture, the differences in the Pastoral epistles of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus are even more stark. ■

Essential Reading

2 Thessalonians, Colossians, Ephesians.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chaps. 25–28.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 23.

Supplemental Reading

Beker, *The Heirs of Paul*.

Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*.

Questions to Consider

1. It is possible to distinguish between the authorship and the authority of a work. In your view, would the fact that a book was pseudonymous necessarily compromise its authority? That is to say, could it still convey true, important, or normative teaching? Why or why not?
2. As an exercise in determining whether Paul wrote one of the Deutero-Paulines, do a (very) detailed comparison of 1 Thess. 4:13–5:10 and 2 Thess. 2:1–12 to see if you think the same author could have written both. Are any of the differences particularly stark? Then do the same exercise with Rom. 6:4 and Col. 2:12.

Erratum: Professor Ehrman refers to Philippians 2:3. The correct reference should be Philippians 3:6.

The Pastoral Epistles

Lecture 20

We know that there were documents forged in Paul's name in early Christianity. ... It appears that several such documents actually made their way into the New Testament.

We have looked at the three Deutero-Pauline epistles of 2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians and the reasons to question their authorship. Remember that the question is not whether Christians in antiquity forged documents in the names of the apostles. We know they did. We have apocalypses allegedly written in the names of Peter and of Paul; Gospels allegedly written by Thomas, Peter, Bartholomew and even Mary Magdalene; and letters forged in the names of various Christians—even Jesus himself. We only question specific cases: Was a particular document written by its alleged author and did this document make its way into the canon of the New Testament? In the Deutero-Paulines, it appears that later disciples of Paul wrote letters in his name, addressing problems that had arisen in their own communities by claiming the authority of their revered teacher.

Something very similar seems to have happened with the three letters of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. These letters are called the Pastoral Epistles, because they provide instruction to pastors in how to execute their responsibilities. Most critical scholars are convinced, though, that the author giving these instructions was not Paul.

We will begin our discussion by considering these three letters as a group. It is clear that whoever authored these letters wrote them as a group. Both 1 and 2 Timothy are addressed to the same person and are very similar in terms of style—for example, in the opening words of each letter. Titus looks almost like an abstract of 1 Timothy, virtually a *Readers Digest* version. Each letter is written to a pastor of a large Christian community: Timothy of the church in Ephesus, Titus of the church on the isle of Crete. Each letter deals with slightly different situations, but the major issues are the same. False teachers

have begun to create problems for the congregations. The communities are suffering from internal problems of disorganization.

The letters urge the pastors to take charge, to run a tight ship, to keep everyone in line, and above all, to silence those who promote ideas that conflict with the ideas of the author and his pastoral friends. One of the prominent instructions involves the heretical teachings of the author's opponents, whom he describes in harsh tones. He calls them "lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman...profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure," and so on (2 Tim. 3:2–5). Indeed, they may have been all these things and more, but he never indicates what they teach that he found so offensive. Nor does he indicate why what they teach is wrong. In fact, the pastors are not to have serious discussions with these teachers to work out their differences; they are to bring them into submission (1 Tim. 1:3–5). This seems unlike Paul, who usually marshals his arguments against wrong teaching. There may be some indications that the teachers were Gnostics. They appear to subscribe to what the author refers to as "the contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge" (= *gnosis*) (1 Tim. 6:20) and, like Gnostics, they seem to be particularly enthralled with "myths" and "endless genealogies" of the gods (1 Tim. 1:4). If so, this might indicate that the author is writing in a later period than Paul was, because Gnosticism had probably not taken root in Paul's day.

The author is concerned that these churches appoint proper leaders. In both 1 Timothy and Titus, he gives detailed instructions concerning the qualifications of the bishops and deacons who have charge of the churches' physical and spiritual well being. They are to be seasoned Christians with upright moral lives who know how to control their own households and have good reputations on the outside (e.g., 1 Tim. 3:1–13).

These leaders are all to be men. Women are to have no leadership roles in the church; in fact, they are not even to speak in church. In one of the most infamous passages of the New Testament, the author explains that women are descended from Eve, who was deceived by the serpent in the garden of Eden, ate the forbidden fruit to bring sin into the world, then duped her husband into doing likewise (1 Tim. 2:11–15). His conclusion is that if

women are allowed to lead, they will be deceived by the devil, will deceive their husbands, and will lead their husbands into sin and ruin. Women are, therefore, to be silent in church and hope to be saved by bearing children.

There are compelling reasons for thinking that Paul did not write these letters. On the micro-level of the words themselves, the vocabulary of the letters speaks against their authenticity. To illustrate: Suppose someone were to uncover a letter allegedly written by Paul that urged its readers to attend mass every Saturday night, go to confession twice a week, and say three Hail Mary's for every unintentional sin? The vocabulary itself, as well as the concepts they express, developed long after Paul's day. Nothing that striking occurs in the Pastorals, but the vocabulary is strikingly non-Pauline. Of the 848 different words found here, 306 occur nowhere else in the Pauline writings of the New Testament (even counting the Deutero-Paulines). Two-thirds of these non-Pauline words appear in Christian authors of the 2nd century. Perhaps even more striking is that some words are found in the Pastorals and in Paul, but they have taken on different meanings. For example, *faith* no longer refers to "a trusting acceptance of Christ's death for your sins" (i.e., it is no longer a *relational* term); instead, it refers to "the body of teaching that makes up true religion" (i.e., it is a *propositional* term) (Tit.1:13).

More striking are the differences in the historical situation presupposed by these letters, compared to Paul's historical context and the way he responded to it. We have already discussed the issue of Gnosticism in terms of the time of its emergence in the early Christian church. These letters presuppose an established hierarchy of church authority, but there was no such hierarchy in place in Paul's day. In these letters, there is one head of the church (Timothy or Titus) and a group of bishops and deacons serving under him. Contrast that with what is found in Paul's letters. In 1 Corinthians, riddled with so many problems, why didn't Paul write to the pastor of the church to tell him to get his congregation in order? The answer is plain: There was no pastor. Paul's churches of the 50s A.D. were thought of as Spirit-led communities, in which everyone had a gift and a role to play. There weren't leaders with the authority to make ultimate decisions. For Paul, the end was coming right away; in such a short term, there's scarcely any need to organize for the long haul. The situation in the Pastorals appears more like what develops later in

the 2nd century, where there is one leader over the church, a group of elders who serve under him, and a group of deacons in charge of the physical needs of the community. Eventually, of course, this led to the development of a bishop over the bishops and beyond that, to one head bishop, the Bishop of Rome, who later became known as the Pope. That, of course, is a later development, well beyond Paul's day. The Pastorals seem to presuppose some such later situation.

The different situation appears to be reflected in the Pastoral's attitude toward women, as well. They are to have no leadership roles in the churches, not even to speak, let alone serve as bishops and deacons. What about Paul's own churches? It's true that 1 Cor. 14:34–35 sounds a lot like 1 Timothy 2:11–15, namely, that women are not to speak in church. Many scholars believe there are grounds for thinking that 1 Cor. 14:34–35 was not written by Paul but inserted into his letter by a later scribe who wanted the book to sound more like the Pastorals. Variorum text demonstrated this likelihood. In fact, elsewhere, even in 1 Corinthians itself, Paul grants women the right to speak out in church services—for example, as they pray and prophesy (1 Corinthians 11). In other places in his letters, Paul affirms women leaders in the church. In Romans 16, for example, he mentions such women missionaries as Prisca and Persis, a woman deacon of the church named Phoebe, and even a woman named Junia whom he calls “foremost among the apostles.” Unlike the Pastoral Epistles, Paul's writing endorses the active leadership of women in the Church.

The Church was becoming more highly organized and women were being pushed into the margins.

The Church was becoming more highly organized and women were being pushed into the margins. This was a clear trend in early Christian communities. Jesus had a number of women followers, as seen throughout the Gospel traditions (this would have been unusual for a Jewish rabbi); Paul seems to have supported women in the Church. Women's influence in the churches may have been justified on the grounds that churches met in private homes—which was mostly where women's authority resided in the Roman world. As the Church grew, it became more public, and men may have

grown uncomfortable with allowing women to exercise authority. By the 2nd century, it appears that women were shut out of authority roles altogether in most Christian circles. The Pastoral Epistles presuppose that later context and tend to indicate that the author wrote these letters in response, fictitiously urging (under the authority of Paul) that the churches build up their internal hierarchies to be equipped to face the challenges of their day. ■

Essential Reading

1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chaps. 29–31.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 23.

Supplemental Reading

Beker, *Heirs of Paul*.

Roetzel, *The Letters of Paul*.

Questions to Consider

1. In your judgment, would a pseudonymous author necessarily have to consider his writing to be a work of deceit?
2. Read through the Pastoral Epistles on your own and list ways that these books seem to you to be very much like and very much unlike the undisputed letters of Paul.

The Book of Hebrews and the Rise of Christian Anti-Semitism

Lecture 21

Most scholars think that [the Epistle of Hebrews] was just that—a sermon, a word of exhortation, a sermon that was delivered by an early Christian preacher to his congregation. As such, this would be the earliest Christian sermon to survive intact.

The Epistle to the Hebrews appears to be misnamed on both counts. It is not an epistle. Ancient letters usually begin by naming the author and indicating the audience (as in Paul’s epistles). There is nothing like that here; instead, the author describes the writing as “a word of exhortation” (13:22). Most scholars think that the letter was just that, a sermon delivered by an early Christian preacher to his congregation. As such, it would be the earliest Christian sermon to survive intact. The congregation does not appear to have been made up of Jews, as the later title “to the Hebrews” might lead one to suspect. At one point in the letter, the writer reminds them of what they learned when they first came to believe, including “faith in God, the resurrection from the dead, and eternal punishment” (6:1–2). Presumably Jews would already have subscribed to such beliefs, even before becoming Christian. It appears then that the congregation is made up of Gentiles, former pagans.

The book deals extensively with the relationship of Christianity and Judaism, mounting numerous arguments that Jesus and the religion based on him are superior in every way to anything Judaism has to offer. This may have been what confused later readers into thinking that the book was addressed to Jews—perhaps as a way of showing them that they should convert. The author indicates, however, that he is concerned that members of his congregation should not be tempted to leave the Church and become Jewish. He is writing to head them off, to show them that it would be a huge mistake with eternal consequences for them to forsake Christ for Judaism.

It does not appear that this author was Paul. Paul's name never appears in the book and the writing style is not at all like his. The major topics of discussion (e.g., the Old Testament priesthood and the Jewish sacrificial system) never show up in Paul's writings. Even though a number of names have been proposed as the author of this book over the years, including Paul's companions Barnabas and Apollos and even the woman Priscilla, we really don't know who the author was. As the 3rd-century Church Father from Alexandria, Origen, once said: "As to who the author of this book is, God knows."

The author organizes his sermon around the innumerable ways that Christ is superior to everything in Judaism. For example, he is superior to the Jewish prophets, because they spoke so long ago but he has spoken in recent times, as the perfect reflection of God's own glory (1:1–3). He is superior to Moses, who was one of God's servants. But Christ is God's actual son (3:1–6). He is superior to the Jewish priests (4:14–5:10; 7:1–29). Because they were sinful, they had to offer a sacrifice for their own sins before they could offer one for the sake of the people. Christ, on the other hand, was completely without sin and did not need to make a sacrifice for himself. The sacrifices the Jewish priests made had to be performed repeatedly; Christ's sacrifice of himself was perfect and needed to be offered only once.

Christ is the minister of a superior sanctuary (9:1–28), especially compared to the tabernacles used in Jewish worship. The Jewish priests performed their sacrifices in a temporary sanctuary that was constructed according to a heavenly model. Christ did not sacrifice himself in the replica, but took his sacrifice up to heaven itself, into the real sanctuary, in the presence of God himself.

Christ is the fulfillment of all that the Jewish Scriptures anticipated. This may seem like an ironical claim—that the Jewish Scriptures show that Judaism is no longer valid and a new religion is superior to it. But it's a claim made in slightly different ways by other Christians as well (for example, Matthew and Paul). The author seems to understand Jesus' fulfillment of the Scriptures in two distinct, but related, ways. First, he uses predictions of the Jewish Scriptures to show that God had planned something new that would supplant the Jewish religion. For example: Jer. 31:31–34 indicates that God was going

to make a new covenant with the people of Israel, because they had broken the old one (8:7–9). Jesus is that new covenant. The old covenant, based on the Law, is no longer in force.

He also portrays Christ as superior to Judaism to the extent that the reality of a thing is superior to that which foreshadowed it. The Old Testament sanctuary and Law, for example, are both said to be mere “shadows” of the reality of Christ (8:5; 10:1). This imagery of “shadow” versus “reality” reflects philosophical metaphors that go back to Plato, nearly 500 years earlier. Plato insisted that things that appear to be real were only shadows of a greater reality. Physical pleasure, for example, has all the appearance of being a great good, but it is good only in appearance (witness the suffering sometimes brought on by excessive indulgence in pleasure).

The most famous illustration of this idea is in Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.” There, prisoners chained together can see shadows on the wall in front of them but not the people behind them who are manipulating puppets in front of a great fire, thereby creating the shadows. The prisoners wrongly assume that the shadows are the things themselves. Were they to be unchained and see for themselves the real situation, though, they would realize how fully they had been deceived by what they had mistaken to be reality (Plato, *Republic*, Book VII). Once one sees reality “as it really is,” there is no longer any pleasure in the “shadows.” For the author of Hebrews, Christ is the reality foreshadowed in the Hebrew Bible. Once a person has experienced him, there is no turning back.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is probably the strongest statement in the New Testament that the religion of the Jews is no longer valid, that God has transcended it in bringing the Christian religion into the world. In some ways, it marks an early point



Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, LC-USZ61-1310.

The imagery of foreshadowing versus reality in the New Testament reflects philosophical metaphors that go back to Plato.

in the trend among Christians to discount, and eventually to attack, Judaism. The irony, of course, is that Christianity started out as Jewish in the teachings of the Jewish prophet, Jesus. After his death, though, Christians appeared to be far less concerned with the religion he espoused than with the religion founded on his death and resurrection.

Most Jews, of course, rejected this new religion right from the earliest days of Christianity. For many Jews, it seemed ludicrous to call Jesus the messiah, because he was not a figure of power that had overcome the enemies of the people of Israel. He was a crucified criminal. To insist that God had “changed the rules,” by invalidating the Law that he himself had given his people, or that he had rescinded an “eternal” covenant that he had made, was tantamount to calling God a turncoat and a liar. Christians insisted that their religion was “true Judaism” and, because the only way to God was through the death of Jesus, anyone who retained the old Judaism was necessarily damned by the God they claimed to worship.

Christianity started out as Jewish in the teachings of the Jewish prophet, Jesus.

Animosities naturally arose and were exacerbated as Christianity became a primarily Gentile religion—yet one that claimed to represent Judaism as it ought to be. Jews naturally found this offensive—non-Jews who did not even attempt to keep the Jewish Law or join the Jewish people were claiming to be the true people of the God of the Jews, insisting that the Jews themselves had been rejected by their own God. Christians, to validate their beliefs, looked to Scriptures to find examples of when and where God expressed his displeasure with the Jewish people. There were many examples in the Prophets that were adduced for this purpose.

We can see the animosities in later sermons from the early Christians, including one particularly vitriolic homily delivered by a 2nd-century Christian bishop named Melito from the city of Sardis in Asia Minor. In Melito’s sermon, preached on an Easter with the Exodus story of the Passover as the background, Israel is maligned and attacked for the way it treated Jesus (as if all Israel were to blame), killing their own Passover lamb. Even

more horrific, because Melito considers Jesus to be God, he accuses Israel of deicide: they have murdered the creator of the universe, God himself. (Melito *Easter Homily*, chapters. 95–96). This is the first of many charges that the Jewish people killed God. Such animosity, as it emerged in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, did not have a huge impact on society at large. Most people were neither Jew nor Christian, so the squabbles were ultimately of little moment outside the small circles of Christianity.

All that changed, of course, with the conversion of the Roman emperor Constantine to Christianity in the 4th century A.D. Thereafter, it became quite popular to be Christian, and Christianity, as a result, eventually had the power of the entire empire behind it. At that point, Christian animosity toward Judaism took on a fevered pitch and Christians had the wherewithal, at last, to act out their animosity. Synagogues were burned, property was confiscated, Jews were killed. This was the beginning of one of the most heinous chapters in the history of Christianity, from the anti-Semitism dominant among Christian countries throughout the Middle Ages to the climax in our own time with the unspeakable crimes of the Holocaust.

The Book of Hebrews, of course, does not urge acts of anti-Semitism. It stands only at the beginning of a trajectory of thought that leads to anti-Semitism. In fact, it's clear from the book that it is the *Christians* at the time who have been experiencing persecution—possibly at the hands of Jews, who near the end of the 1st century were far more numerous and powerful than the Christians, but more likely at the hands of local governmental authorities (cf., 10:32–34). This author is urging his hearers not to fall away from the faith in the midst of their suffering, not to turn away into a more protected religion, such as Judaism. Those who neglect the salvation provided by Christ, who return to the outside world after joining the Church, will receive a fearful and eternal punishment (2:1–4; 3:7–18; 10:27–29). ■

Essential Reading

The Epistle to the Hebrews.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 32.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 24.

Sandmel, *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament*.

Supplemental Reading

Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*.

Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*.

Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*.

Questions to Consider

1. Choose several of the important figures we have considered in this course—e.g., Jesus, Matthew, Luke, Paul, the author of Hebrews—and discuss ways in which they can be seen as both Jewish and anti-Jewish. Do you see anything that you would label “anti-Semitism” in the New Testament?
2. We saw in an earlier lecture that pagan religions were mostly tolerant of one another, none of them making “exclusivistic” claims for itself. Christianity seems, though, to be different. Do you think Christianity is *necessarily* exclusivistic (i.e., that it necessarily has to claim that it alone is “true” and “right”)? Is it necessarily intolerant? Is there any way an exclusivistic religion could still be tolerant?

First Peter and the Persecution of the Early Christians

Lecture 22

This was the message of hope that many Christians continued to cling on to in the face of sporadic persecution.

Throughout the books of the New Testament, one finds numerous references to Christians' suffering. In the last lecture, we saw that the Epistle to the Hebrews was a sermon written to a group of Christians who were experiencing some form of persecution; the author was striving to convince his hearers not to succumb to pressure and leave the church for Judaism. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus tells his followers that they must take up their crosses if they want to follow him. In the Book of Acts, the early Christian communities are persecuted by the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. The apostle Paul himself is eventually arrested and put up on charges of disturbing the peace. Nowhere is the theme of Christian suffering more pronounced, though, than in the book of 1 Peter.

This book is addressed to Christians living in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey); the word for *suffering* occurs more often in this short letter than in any other book of the New Testament—even more than Luke and Acts combined. These people were probably former pagans, who have removed themselves from the daily life of the larger community and adopted a stricter set of moral standards for themselves. There has been some kind of public outcry, apparently by those who feel abandoned by their former friends and companions (4:4). The turmoil may have reached the point of mob violence or governmental intervention. The author speaks of the “fiery ordeal that is taking place among you” (4:12).

The author writes his letter both to console those in the community who are suffering and to urge them to maintain their solidarity with one another. On the one hand, he explains that their suffering is natural and to be expected—they are, after all, followers of Christ, who was himself crucified (4:12–13). He urges them, though, to make sure they suffer for doing what is right,

never for doing what is wrong (3:14–17; 4:14–15). They should not behave in a way that offends outsiders but should be ready to explain what it is that makes them different (3:15–17). The author stresses that these Christians have a distinct status as a community that has been set apart from the world to belong to God. Sociologists have long recognized that group solidarity can be created by acts of hatred and persecution, because the group forms bonds of cohesion, realizing that they are “all in it together.” Something like that appears to be happening in this letter, as the author assures his readers that they are a people set apart, belonging to God alone (1:3, 2:3, and especially 2:9). Moreover, when he urges them to engage in moral behavior, he may be thinking not only of their own need to follow God’s Law but also of the possible repercussions on those outside the community. When outsiders realize how the Christians react to persecution, they too might repent (2:11; 3:13–15).

Scholars continue to debate whether this author was actually the disciple of Jesus, Simon Peter. He certainly claims to be, in the first verse of the book. But as we’ve seen, all such claims need to be tested. According to the Gospels, Peter was a lower-class Jewish fisherman from Galilee. As such, he would have been uneducated (only the upper classes had the leisure to learn to read) and his native tongue would have been Aramaic. According to Acts, he was known to be illiterate (Acts 4:13). His book, though, is written by a well-educated, rhetorically trained, Greek-speaking Christian. Although it is possible that Peter wrote the book or dictated its contents to someone (perhaps the “Silvanus” mentioned in 5:12), who translated his words into Greek and provided them with a rhetorical flourish, it’s also possible that the book is written pseudonymously in Peter’s name—as were several other books that have come down to us from the 2nd century (cf., the Gospel of Peter).

As one of the clearest indications that early Christians were persecuted, 1 Peter can serve as a springboard for the larger question of Roman opposition to Christianity in its early days. Many people have a complete misperception of Roman attitudes toward Christians, thinking, for example, that Rome declared Christianity illegal and sent out the troops to round up the Christians, who survived by hiding in the catacombs. That may be suitable for a Hollywood screenplay, but it is simply not true historically. Christianity

was not declared “illegal” until nearly two centuries after the writings of Paul—not until A.D. 250 under the fervently pagan emperor Decius. Only then were there any empire-wide persecutions (and there is some question about how extensive the persecution was even at that point). Before then, Christians were occasionally persecuted, as were many other groups, but they did not go into hiding *en mass* and communicate with one another only in private.

Christians had the same rights and responsibilities as anyone else in the Roman Empire. Starting a new religion was not illegal. Christians had the right to worship any God they wanted, even the Jewish God. And no one would have thought it “illegal” even to call Jesus “God.” Most people believed that occasionally humans came along who were also divine.

To understand why Christians were occasionally persecuted by Roman authorities, we have to know something about the Roman legal system. Unlike Roman civil law, which was extremely complex and nuanced, Roman criminal law was, by our standards, completely lax and haphazard. Criminal activities were not strictly defined and punishments were not prescribed by law. Neither the Roman emperor nor the Senate passed criminal legislation

Christians were themselves persecuted and prosecuted—not because their religion was against some kind of Roman law—but because they were perceived as public nuisances.

binding on all the inhabitants of the Roman Empire. The provinces were ruled by governors, chosen from the Roman aristocracy, who were appointed by either the emperor or the Senate. The provincial governors had two major responsibilities: to raise tax revenues and to keep the peace. They were granted nearly absolute authority to achieve these objectives. It was assumed that

the governor, on location, would best know how to handle any situation, using whatever means necessary to maintain public order and maximize revenue collection. Using any means necessary meant having the power of life and death. From a Roman administrative point of view, Pontius Pilate was completely justified in condemning Jesus to death as a public nuisance. Making that kind of decision was what he was appointed to do.

Christians were themselves persecuted and prosecuted—not because their religion was against some kind of Roman law—but because they were perceived as public nuisances. Authorities took care of problems on an ad hoc basis. From both Paul and the Book of Acts, we see that Christian missionary activity sometimes led to public disturbances. Christians would often abandon their own families to join the new community. These splits in the family were often painful to those who were left behind (cf., Matt. 10:34–37). Because the Christians were known to be a closed community, they sometimes came under suspicion as a secret society. In particular, widely believed slanders were leveled against the Christians. Because they met at night, called one another brother and sister, engaged in “love feasts” (that is, communal meals), practiced a ritual kiss, and actually ate the body and drank the blood of the son of God, they were widely believed to engage in nocturnal orgies involving incest and cannibalism (cf., the words of Fronto, the teacher of the 2nd-century emperor Marcus Aurelius).

Altogether, the early Christians had a considerable “image problem.” Consider the two pagan authors who were the first to mention Jesus, whom we discussed earlier. The Roman historian Tacitus labeled the Christians a “pernicious superstition” and says they were the “hatred of the human race.” This, he claims, is why Nero could easily make them scapegoats for the burning of Rome for which he was responsible (*Annals* 15). Pliny the Younger, governor of part of the region that 1 Peter itself addresses, called them “obstinate” and “mad” adherents of a “depraved superstition.” He was responsible for their persecution when they refused to abandon their Christian ways.

The problem was exacerbated by the fact that Christians refused to participate in the public ceremonies honoring the state and local gods. Because the Christians believed there was only one true God, they couldn’t very well participate in the worship of others. This made no sense, though, to pagans. As polytheists, they found the idea that if you worshipped one god you couldn’t worship another to be nonsense (it would be the same as saying that you couldn’t like one friend if you happened to like another). In addition, it was widely believed that the only thing the gods required was that people perform occasional acts of reverence to them—for example, through public sacrifices—and that any calamities that happened in life were the result of

the gods' anger at not being properly acknowledged. Because Christians didn't make these acknowledgements, they found themselves in the hot seat when any disasters hit a village, town, or city.

The earliest Christians were persecuted in a completely ad hoc and random fashion. It appears that persecution usually began at the grassroots level, as either alienated family members or rebuffed friends took umbrage when Christians removed themselves from everyday life. The problems were exacerbated when small or large disasters occurred, because these were easily laid at the feet of the Christians, who steadfastly refused to worship the gods. If any acts of mob violence occurred, Roman governors might step in and round up the Christians. If the Christians continued to flout authority (e.g., by still refusing to worship the gods), they could be punished or executed. The emperors appear to have sanctioned this kind of activity, and why not? If any group caused problems, it had to be dealt with.

It was not for a couple of centuries that Christians grew large enough as a group to begin to worry the Roman administration in any serious way. At that time, in the middle of the 3rd century, serious and systematic persecutions began. ■

Essential Reading

1 Peter.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 33.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 25.

Supplemental Reading

Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*.

Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*.

Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*.

Questions to Consider

1. Make a catalogue of the reasons and ways people suffer and consider which of these might be justly considered “religious” suffering.
2. How could early texts that portray Christians as a small, persecuted minority be relevant to the modern context, in which the Christian religion wields such enormous social, economic, and political power? Are there instances in which modern Christians *talk* as if they were still a small, persecuted minority? What is behind this sort of rhetoric?

The Book of Revelation

Lecture 23

The Book of Revelation was not written to describe our own future, it wasn't written in the context of 21st century America, but in the context of 1st century Rome.

In the last lecture, we saw that a good deal of the early Christian literature was produced in the context of persecution and suffering. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the final book of the New Testament, the Book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John. This is a fascinating visionary account of the end of the world, an account that has provided grist for the mills of doomsday prophets ever since, for whom it is by far the most favored book of the New Testament. It is probably also the book that is, and always has been, the most misunderstood.

The basic story line of the book is reasonably clear. After some introductory matters, the book describes a series of disturbing visions given to a prophet named John. After an opening vision of the risen Christ, John is instructed to write letters to each of the seven churches of Asia Minor, detailing their successes and failures and urging them to remain committed to Christ. He is then miraculously transported to heaven, where he is shown the future course of the earth's catastrophic history. He sees God on his throne and a lamb that has been slain next to it (representing Christ). The lamb is handed a scroll that is sealed with seven seals. As he breaks the seals, one by one, disasters strike the earth: war, famine, plague, suffering, and death. The breaking of the seventh seal leads to another sequence of disasters, as seven angels appear blowing seven trumpets, each blast bringing yet more disasters. The seventh trumpet leads to another sequence of disasters, as seven angels appear with seven huge bowls filled with God's wrath, which are poured one by one upon the earth. Meanwhile, on earth, the great enemy of God has arisen, the satanically inspired anti-Christ, who is responsible for destroying the people of God and leading multitudes away from him. At the end, when God's wrath is used up, there is a final battle. Christ confronts and overthrows the anti-Christ, destroys all his enemies, subjects them to eternal punishment in a lake of fire, and creates a new heaven and a new earth, a

utopian world in which his followers will live forever apart from any trace of evil.

The natural tendency of people who read this book is to assume that it is offers an account of what is still to come in our own future. And so it has been understood through the ages. One of the problems, though, is that every generation has assumed that the book predicts what will happen in its own time. So far, every generation has been wrong (even though each new one thinks that it will surely be the one). Our own generation, of course, is no exception. The book was used that way by David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, by Marshall Applewhite and Heaven's Gate, by most mainline evangelical preachers that you can hear any day of the week by turning on your TV, and by scores of serious interpreters of prophecy whose books line the shelves of most Christian bookstores—including second and third editions when the predictions of the first have had to be modified in light of their failure to come true.

One of the problems, though, is that every generation has assumed that the book predicts what will happen in its own time.

Luckily, there is an alternative to this approach, and that is to try to understand the book in light of its own historical context. The term *revelation* derives from a Latin word that is the equivalent of the Greek word *apocalypse*, which means “an unveiling” or “a revealing.” The term *apocalypse* is applied to a number of ancient Jewish and Christian books, all of which another claim to unveil or reveal the spiritual truths from above that make sense of the mundane realities we experience down here. These books embody the world view of apocalypticism that we’ve already discussed on several occasions, although, of course, most people who subscribed to that world view did not write apocalypses.

The Book of Revelation seems so strange and bizarre and unique to most readers today, precisely because this is the only book of its kind from antiquity that people know about and read. In fact, this kind of book was not at all unusual in the ancient world. To understand this book, we need to

understand how its literary genre works. Recognizing the genre of any piece of writing is important to its interpretation. Suppose you were to read about a highly sensitive biological project that could leak a new strain of bacteria into the atmosphere and could destroy life as we know it. Your reaction to the piece would depend on whether you found it in a Stephen King novel or on the front page of the *New York Times*. Without understanding the conventions of the genre of a piece of writing, you will misconstrue its intention and meaning.

Because there are numerous works like the Book of Revelation from antiquity—both Jewish and Christian apocalypses—we can compare them to one another to get some idea of the genre. In the most basic terms, these books reported visions or dreams—usually fairly bizarre visions or dreams—of a prophet. These visions were taken to explain the nature of reality, either by showing the true meaning of life here on earth or, as in the case of Revelation, by showing how life here on earth was soon to come to a crashing halt.

There were two major types of apocalypses. In some, a prophet is taken on a guided tour of heaven, to see what ultimate reality looks like and to realize how events taking place on earth reflect, and are therefore determined by, events that take place in heaven. In others, the prophet is shown the future course of history, up to the very end, when the world comes to a screeching halt. Revelation represents a conflation of these two basic types: The prophet is shown the heavenly realm *and* sees the future catastrophic climax of the world's history.

Most apocalypses contain several specific literary features. The majority of them are pseudonymous, written in the famous names of persons from the past. Thus, we have apocalypses attributed to Moses, Abraham, Elijah, and even Adam. By claiming to be one of these famous men of God in the past, the author, of course, ascribes unusual authority to his work. The writer can place himself back in time and make predictions about the future that sound valid because they describe history. The Book of Revelation is virtually unique in not being pseudonymous. It is written by someone who calls himself John. Because this was such a common name in antiquity, it is difficult to know who he was. He does not appear to be John the son of

Zebedee, Jesus' disciple, because at one point, he has a vision of the apostles and doesn't seem to see himself.

Apocalyptic writings contain bizarre symbolic visions. The future is described not in straightforward and prosaic terms but in mystical and metaphorical ones. Often, though, the symbols are transparent when read in light of the book's historical context. Take, for example, the "great whore of Babylon" whom the prophet sees in Revelation 17. This is a prostitute who has committed fornication with the kings of the earth; who is seated on a scarlet beast, bedecked in fine clothes and jewelry; who is drunk with the blood of the martyrs; and who has written on her head, "Babylon, the mother of whores." A strange sight indeed. But this image is not so hard to interpret: The beast is said to have seven heads, which the author explains refers to seven hills on which the woman is seated (v. 8). At the end, we're told that she is the "great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (v. 18). Who then is the great whore of the earth? Which city ruled the world at the end of the 1st century, a city that had persecuted the Christians, a city in fact that was known throughout antiquity as the city built on seven hills? Any ancient reader would have recognized the city of Rome readily.

Consider the most famous puzzle of Revelation: the great enemy of God, the anti-Christ (Chapter 13), who is given the number of the beast, 666. Who is it? The answer is not so surprising when the text is put in a 1st-century context. By indicating the beast's "number," the author is referring to the common practice from antiquity of calculating the number of a word or name based on the numerical value assigned to each of its letters. Who was the first emperor of Rome to persecute Christians? Nero. Spell Caesar Nero's name in Hebrew letters and add them up. They total 666. Interestingly, a recent book that discusses a newly discovered Greek manuscript has the number as 616, which is the numerical value of an alternate spelling of Nero's name. This may not be as exciting as thinking that the anti-Christ is someone living in our own day or is soon to come. We have had devoted Christian authors over the past 50 years arguing that 666 must refer to Hitler, Mussolini, the Pope, Henry Kissinger, Saddam Hussein, or Ronald Wilson Reagan (6-6-6). But if we're interested in knowing what the author himself meant, it helps to think about his world.

The narratives of apocalypses are characterized by violent repetitions, i.e., repetitions that “violate” any literal chronological sequencing of events. For example, at one point in Revelation, when God’s wrath strikes the earth, there are disasters of cosmic proportions: The sun turns dark, the moon turns to blood, the stars fall from heaven, and the sky is rolled back. You would think that we are at the end of all things, but we’re only in chapter six. There are 12 more chapters of disaster to occur, with sun, moon, and stars still shining in full force. The repetitions are for effect; they can’t be taken as a literal sequence.

Apocalypses are characterized by a triumphant movement from cataclysm to utopia, from horrendous suffering on earth to the restoration of peace and

The point of the books is that this suffering is overseen by God, who will soon bring it to an end before setting up his utopian kingdom.

harmony. Suffering in these books can reach unimaginable heights, but the entire course of events is directed by God himself, who is sovereign over his creation and will reward those who remain faithful to him. This makes particular sense if we understand that the books are directed to those who are already suffering in what appears to them

to be unimaginable ways. The point of the books is that this suffering is overseen by God, who will soon bring it to an end before setting up his utopian kingdom.

These books stress that the end of all things is imminent. Suffering won’t last long, because God will soon bring all history to a resounding climax. In the Book of Revelation, the emphasis is just this point: “Lord Jesus come quickly.” The overarching themes of these books, then, are encouragement and admonition. The author of Revelation, as the authors of most apocalypses, was writing to encourage his readers in the midst of their own suffering: God is sovereign and in control; he will soon bring your sufferings to an end. Do not give up hope. In many respects, the point is not to give a precise blueprint of future events or an itemized timetable of when they will occur. It is to give hope to those for whom life in the present was virtually unbearable. God can be trusted to bring all things to a happy end.

By way of a quick conclusion and summary, I can reaffirm that the Book of Revelation was not written as a blueprint for our own future. It was written in the context of 1st-century Rome. In that context, the enemy of God was Rome and its emperor was the anti-Christ; they were responsible for the intense suffering that Christians were experiencing. In that context, an author named John wrote an apocalypse. His work was similar to other apocalypses written before him and others written since, filled with bizarre dreams and strange symbolism, to assure his readers of the final sovereignty of God and of his Christ, who would soon bring their suffering to an end. Christians living in a context of intense suffering need to realize that God is ultimately in control and he, rather than the forces of evil aligned against him, will have the last word. ■

Essential Reading

The Book of Revelation.

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 37.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 27.

Supplemental Reading

Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*.

Pilch, *What Are They Saying about the Book of Revelation?*

Questions to Consider

1. In what ways is the apocalyptic worldview found in the Book of Revelation similar to and different from the apocalyptic views of Jesus? Of Paul? How does it compare with the emphases of the Fourth Gospel (which later Christians actually attributed to the same author, John)?

2. Many Christians over the centuries have read the Book of Revelation as a blueprint for events that were soon to come and have thus seen it as a source of hope. Is it possible to read the book more historically, as addressed to Christians suffering in the days of Rome and not as a descriptive account of things yet to take place, and still find its message inspired by hope?

Note: For information about another Teaching Company course on apocalyptic writing, please refer to the end of the Bibliography.

Do We Have the Original New Testament?

Lecture 24

We can say with some confidence that we don't have the original text of any of the books of the New Testament. ... There is no alternative to this situation and there never will be unless by some unbelievable stroke of luck we discover the original text themselves.

We do not have the originals of any of the books that were later canonized into the New Testament. What we have are copies of the originals, or better yet, copies of the copies of the copies of the originals—copies made for the most part hundreds of years after the originals themselves. These copies are all written by hand, the literal meaning of the term *manuscript*. Unfortunately, all of these surviving copies contain mistakes. For that reason, it is often difficult to know what words were in the original texts. And that's an important matter, because it's impossible to interpret what an author meant if you don't know what he said. Let me illustrate the problem by giving a solitary example of how things worked.

When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, someone in the community must have copied it by hand, one word at a time. That copy was then copied, possibly in Corinth, possibly in some other community that found out about the letter and wanted a copy. That copy was then copied, as were later copies. Before long, there were a large number of copies in circulation in different communities throughout the Mediterranean. In this long process of copying and recopying, the original was eventually lost, worn out, burned, or otherwise destroyed. No one saw the need to keep the original when copies were readily available. Had they been more aware of what happens to a manuscript that gets copied by hand, they may have been more diligent in preserving the original. What happens is that copyists, especially untrained specialists (like most of the early Christians who served as copyists), make mistakes. A subsequent copyist will reproduce the mistakes and introduce new mistakes—or else he will try to correct mistakes, sometimes doing so in a way that creates even further mistakes. We don't have the original of 1 Corinthians, or its first copy, or the copy made of the copy... The first copy of 1 Corinthians we have is a fragment of a manuscript that dates to around

A.D. 200—nearly 150 years after Paul had written it. We don't have complete manuscripts of the books of the New Testament until about 150 years after that (mid-4th century A.D.) and, in all the intervening years, the text was copied slowly by hand, one copy from another, with mistakes creeping in all along the way. The question, then, is how can we take the copies that we do have and establish the text as Paul originally wrote it? (The same applies, of course, for all the books of the New Testament.)

To address this, we must have some basic background information. We have some 5,400 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, not to mention the thousands of copies of the New Testament as translated into Latin—which was the language of the Middle Ages when most manuscripts were produced—and in other ancient languages, such as Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian. The earliest of these manuscripts are tiny fragments of papyrus, many of which were discovered by archaeologists in the trash heaps of Egypt. Papyrus was the ancient writing material used before the invention

The earliest manuscript is a tiny scrap the size of a credit card, written on front and back, that originally came from a full codex manuscript of the Gospel of John.

of paper, manufactured out of reeds that grew in Egypt. Sometimes the papyrus was scrolled or put into a book form called a *codex*; most Christian writers used this latter form.

The earliest manuscript is a tiny scrap the size of a credit card, written on front and back, that originally came from a full codex manuscript

of the Gospel of John. It is called P52, because it was the 50-second papyrus manuscript to be discovered and catalogued in modern times. P52 contains a few lines from John 18, Jesus' trial before Pilate. It was probably produced in the early part of the 2nd century, possibly within 30 to 40 years of the publication of John's Gospel. Complete manuscripts were eventually written on vellum—a material made out of animal skins—starting in the 4th century A.D. The majority of our manuscripts derive from the Middle Ages, from the 7th century onwards. It appears that all these manuscripts, large and small, early and late, contain mistakes. The evidence is virtually unassailable: Among all these thousands of Greek manuscripts, with the exception of the

smallest fragments, there are no two that are exactly alike. That is to say, they all differ in their wording in places. It is difficult to know how many differences there are among the surviving manuscripts. Some scholars think there are 200,000; others believe the number could be 300,000 or more. It's easiest to put the matter in comparative terms: There are more differences among our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.

There is a subdiscipline of New Testament scholarship called *textual criticism*. This discipline seeks to determine which of the different readings found among our manuscripts are mistakes and which represent the original words as penned by the authors. It helps to know just what kinds of mistakes were typically made by New Testament scribes. Many mistakes were pure accidents. The most common mistake is immaterial to the meaning: Scribes misspelled words even more than most people do today. Sometimes scribes inadvertently left out words, lines, or sometimes entire pages. This was especially common when two lines ended with the same words. The scribe would copy the first, but when his eye returned to the page, it sometimes would fall inadvertently on the second, causing him to leave out all the words between the two.

This kind of problem was exacerbated by the fact that, in ancient texts, scribes did not use paragraph divisions, small case letters, punctuation, or even spaces to separate the words. Everything was run together in a jumble that could create havoc both for copyists and for those who simply wanted to read the text (e.g., try to read: lasnighatdinnerisawabundanceonthetable). Occasionally, scribes would insert a marginal note they found in their copies, thinking that the previous scribe had inadvertently left out a line of text and added it in the margin, when in fact the scribe had simply been making a note to himself (e.g., Corinthians 14 and the *Codex Vaticanus* version of Hebrews 1:3).

Scribes also introduced mistakes intentionally. This happened when scribes thought the text they were copying made some kind of factual mistake. For example, in Mark 1:2, the reference to Isaiah is really comprised of a quote from Malachi, Exodus, and Isaiah. Some modern versions merely say “the prophets.” In Mark 2:25, Jesus says that David entered into the temple when Abiathar was the high priest. It is clear from the passage in the Hebrew Bible

to which he was referring (1 Sam 21:1–7), however, that it was not Abiathar, but his father, Ahimelech, who was high priest at the time. Some scribes changed the text to eliminate the discrepancy. Sometimes scribes would try to “harmonize” two accounts in the Gospels so that they read in the same way. For example, both Matthew and Luke have the Lord’s Prayer, but only Matthew gives it in the full form that people are accustomed to today; Luke is lacking several of the petitions. A number of scribes resolved the difference by adding Matthew’s petitions to Luke as well. Even more interesting are items that scribes took to be theological errors that they then corrected. For example, Luke’s Gospel has the story of Jesus visiting Jerusalem as a 12-year old, along with Joseph and Mary. They begin the long trek home, only to discover three days later that Jesus is not with them. After tracking him down in the temple, Mary says to him “Why have you treated us like this? Your *father* and I have been looking all over for you.” Your *father* and I? Scribes who believed in the virgin birth and thought that Joseph was not Jesus’ father, changed the text to “*we* have been looking all over for you.” Or consider the passage in which Jesus gives his apocalyptic teachings in Matthew’s Gospel and indicates that no one knows exactly when the end will come “not the angels in heaven, nor even the Son, but only the Father” (Matt. 24:36). Scribes who thought that Jesus is divine and knows all things changed the text by dropping out the words “nor even the Son.”

From some of these examples, it should be clear that some textual changes are of no real importance for interpretation (for example, the misspelled words), but others are highly significant. The oldest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of John do not contain the famous story of the woman taken in adultery (where Jesus utters his famous line: “let the one without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her”). This was not added until the 12th century. The best witnesses of the Gospel of Mark do not include the final 12 verses, in which Jesus appears to his disciples (in these manuscripts, the text ends with the women fleeing the empty tomb in fear, telling no one what they have seen) (see Lecture Five). The only verses in the entire New Testament that provide an explicit affirmation of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity—that the three divine beings are one (1 John 5:7–8)—is not found in the text of any Greek manuscript until around the time of the invention of printing in the 15th century.

Textual critics apply a number of criteria to determine the original reading of the text in any given instance. The number of manuscripts supporting a reading is usually not of much use. We might have two manuscripts, but one may have been copied 100 times and the other not at all—and even that may have nothing to do with which of the two is the more accurate copy. The age of a manuscript is of some importance, though, because older manuscripts are obviously closer to the originals. The geographical spread of the manuscripts is important, because if one form of a text is found in only one location and another form is found throughout Christendom, the localized form may simply represent a local variant. The quality of the manuscripts is important, because like human beings, some are more likely to be reliable and faithful than others. When a manuscript is reliable in places where you are certain of the original reading, it is also more likely to be reliable in places where you are not certain. It is important to consider which readings are harmonious, less grammatically problematic, and less theologically offensive—not because those readings are more likely to be the original ones, but because precisely they are the ones that scribes would have been likely to change! That is, the more difficult reading is more likely to be original. It is also important to consider which readings coincide more closely with the New Testament author's own writing style and theology, because words that are more like those he usually wrote are more likely the words that he probably did write.

In conclusion, we can say with some confidence that we do not have the original texts of any of the books of the New Testament. Scholars trained in textual criticism devote themselves to examining the surviving manuscripts of the New Testament to see where scribes have made mistakes, in an effort to reconstruct what the authors originally wrote. In many instances, there is little dispute about what the original text was, but in other instances, there remains considerable doubt—and sometimes these are passages of real significance for the interpretation of the text. There is no alternative to this situation and never will be, unless by some unbelievable stroke of luck, we discover the original texts themselves. ■

Essential Reading

Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, chap. 3.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 28.

Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels*.

Supplemental Reading

Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*.

Greenlee, *An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*.

Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*.

Questions to Consider

1. Suppose a rather long story (for example, the last 12 verses of Mark or the woman taken in adultery) were known not to have been part of the original text of the New Testament. Should the story still be considered part of the New Testament canon?
2. Many Christians today believe that God inspired the very words of the New Testament. How would that belief be affected by the fact that in some cases we don't know what the words were?

Timeline

1800 B.C.?	Abraham.
1400 B.C.?	Moses.
753 B.C.	Traditional date for founding of Rome.
750 B.C.?	Homer
750–500 B.C.?	Prophets of Hebrew Bible.
587 B.C.	Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem.
510 B.C.	Expulsion of kings/beginning of Roman Republic.
400 B.C.	Plato.
333–323 B.C.	Conquests of Alexander the Great.
145 B.C.	Book of Daniel (final book of Hebrew Bible).
140 B.C.	Rise of Jewish Sects.
63 B.C.	Conquest of Palestine by Romans.
44 B.C.	Assassination of Julius Caesar.
40–4 B.C.	Herod, King of the Jews.
27 B.C.–A.D. 14	Octavian Caesar Augustus as Emperor.
4 B.C.?	Jesus' birth.

4 B.C.–A.D. 65 Seneca.

A.D. 14–37 Emperor Tiberius.

A.D. 26–36 Pilate as Governor of Judea.

A.D. 30? Jesus’ death.

A.D. 33? Conversion of Paul.

A.D. 37–4 Emperor Caligula.

A.D. 41–54 Emperor Claudius.

A.D. 50–60? Pauline epistles.

A.D. 50–60? Q Source.

A.D. 50–70? M and L Sources.

A.D. 54–68 Emperor Nero.

A.D. 56–117? Tacitus.

A.D. 61/62–113 Pliny the Younger.

A.D. 65? Gospel of Mark.

A.D. 66–70 Jewish Revolt and destruction
of Temple.

A.D. 69–79 Emperor Vespasian.

A.D. 79–81 Emperor Titus.

A.D. 80–85? Gospels of Matthew and Luke,
Book of Acts.

A.D. 80–100?	Deutero-Pauline Epistles, 1 Peter, Hebrews, James.
A.D. 81–96	Emperor Domitian.
A.D. 85–105?	Pastoral Epistles.
A.D. 90–95?	Gospel of John.
A.D. 95?	Book of Revelation.
A.D. 98–117	Emperor Trajan.
A.D. 110–130?	Gospels of Peter and Thomas.
A.D. 120?	2 Peter.
A.D. 129–199	Galen.
A.D. 160–225	Tertullian.
A.D. 190	Melito of Sardis (death).
A.D. 249–251	Emperor Decius.
A.D. 285–337	Constantine.
A.D. 312?	“Conversion” of Constantine.

Glossary

antitheses: Literally, a “contrary statement.” As a technical term, it designates six sayings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–48), in which he states a Jewish Law (“You have heard it said...”), then places his own interpretation on it (“But I say to you...”).

apocalypse: A literary genre in which an author, usually pseudonymous, describes symbolic and often bizarre visions that reveal the heavenly mysteries that make sense of earthly realities.

apocalypticism: A world view held throughout the ancient world by many, Jews and Christians, that claimed that the present age is controlled by forces of evil, which would be destroyed at the end of time, when God would intervene in history to bring in his kingdom. This event was thought to be imminent.

apostle: From a Greek word meaning “one who is sent.” In early Christianity, the term designated emissaries of the faith who were special representatives of Christ. See **disciple**.

autograph: The original manuscript of a document, from a Greek word that means “the writing itself.”

Beatitudes: Literally, “blessings.” The Beatitudes are the sayings of Jesus that begin the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., “Blessed are the poor in spirit...,” Matthew 5:3–12).

canon: From a Greek word that means “ruler” or “straight edge.” The term is used to designate a recognized collection of texts; the New Testament canon is the collection of books that Christians have accepted as authoritative.

Christ: See **Messiah**.

Christology: Any teaching about the nature of Christ.

contextual credibility, criterion of: Commonly used to establish historically reliable material from the life of Jesus. If a saying or deed of Jesus does not plausibly fit into a 1st-century Palestinian context, then it cannot be accepted as authentic.

cosmos: The Greek word for “world.”

covenant: An agreement or treaty between two social or political parties. Ancient Jews used the term to refer to the pact God made with the Jewish ancestors to protect and preserve Israel as his chosen people in exchange for their devotion and adherence to his Law.

cult: Shortened form of “cultus deorum,” a Latin phrase that literally means “care of the gods.” The term is generally used for any set of religious or liturgical practices of worship, such as sacrifice and prayer.

Dead Sea Scrolls: A collection of ancient Jewish writings discovered in several caves near the northwest edge of the Dead Sea. The scrolls are widely thought to have belonged to a group of apocalyptically minded Essenes who lived in a monastic-like community from the mid-2nd century B.C. up through the Jewish War of 66–70 C.E. See **Essenes**, **Qumran**.

Deutero-Pauline Epistles: Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians, letters that have a “secondary” (= deutero) standing among the Pauline epistles because scholars debate whether they were actually written by Paul.

disciple: A follower, one who is “taught” (as opposed to an “apostle” = an emissary, one who is “sent”). In the New Testament, a common designation of one of Jesus’ “12” specially chosen followers.

dissimilarity, criterion of: Used to establish historically reliable material from the life of Jesus. If a saying or deed of Jesus appears to conflict with the vested interests of Christians who preserved the traditions, it is likely to be authentic.

Essenes: An apocalyptically oriented Jewish sect, some of whom started their own monastic-like communities to preserve their purity in anticipation of the coming end of the world; e.g., the community at Qumran, whose members are widely believed to have produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Fourth Philosophy: A group of Jews who insisted on violent opposition to the foreign domination of the Promised Land, e.g., by the Romans.

gentile: A Jewish term for a non-Jew.

Gnosticism: A group of ancient religions, closely related to Christianity, that maintained that sparks of a divine being had become entrapped in the present, evil world and could escape only by acquiring the appropriate secret *gnosis* (Greek for “knowledge”) of who they were and how they could escape. This *gnosis* was generally thought to have been brought by an emissary descended from the divine realm.

Greco-Roman world: The lands and culture of the Mediterranean from Alexander the Great through the early Roman Empire (c. 300 B.C. to A.D. 300).

Hellenization: The spread of Greek language and culture (Hellenism) across the Mediterranean, starting with the conquests of Alexander the Great.

Holy of Holies: The innermost room in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, separated from the rest of the Temple by a thick curtain, where God was believed to dwell. No one was allowed to enter this room, except the High Priest on the Day of Atonement to make a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

independent attestation, criterion of: Used to establish historically reliable material from the life of Jesus. If a saying or deed of Jesus is attested by more than one independent source, it is more likely to be authentic.

judicial model: One of the two models of salvation used by Paul, especially in his letter to the Romans. The model conceives of salvation as a legal process, in which God, who is both lawmaker and judge, treats humans as “not guilty” for their sins (i.e., acts of disobedience) against his Law because he has accepted Jesus’ death as a substation for payment. See **participationist model**.

justification by faith: The idea that lies at the heart of Paul’s “judicial model.” A person is “made right” (= justified) with God by having faith in Christ’s death and resurrection, rather than by doing what is required of Jews in the Law of Moses.

L source: A document (or documents), which may have been written or oral and no longer survives, that provided Luke with traditions that are not found in Matthew or Mark.

M source: A document (or documents), which may have been written or oral and no longer survives, that provided Matthew with traditions that are not found in Mark or Luke.

manuscript: Any handwritten copy of a text.

Melito: A 2nd-century Christian leader from Sardis (in Asia Minor) whose eloquent sermon on the Old Testament story of Exodus casts harsh recriminations against the Jews, accusing them of committing deicide.

Messiah: From a Hebrew word that means “anointed one,” which translates into Greek as *Christos* (whence our English word, *Christ*). The 1st century A.D. saw a variety of expectations of what this future anointed one might be look like. Some Jews expected a future warrior king like David; others, a cosmic judge from heaven; others, an authoritative priestly interpreter of the Law; and others, a powerful prophet from God, like Moses.

Mishnah: A collection of oral traditions that goes back to the oral laws of the Pharisees. These traditions were passed on by generations of Jewish rabbis until they were put into writing around 200 A.D. See **Talmud**.

Nag Hammadi: Village in Upper (South) Egypt, near the place where a collection of Gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Thomas, was discovered in 1945.

paganism: Any of the polytheistic religions of the Greco-Roman world; an umbrella term for ancient Mediterranean religions other than Judaism and Christianity.

papyrus: A reed that grows around the Nile; used in antiquity to manufacture a paper-like writing surface.

participationist model: One of the two models of salvation used by Paul, especially in his letter to the Romans. This model understood sin to be a cosmic force that brought people into slavery. Salvation was seen as a liberation from the bondage to sin, which came by participating in Christ's death through baptism. See **judicial model**.

Passion: From the Greek word for "suffering." The Passion is used as a technical term for the traditions of Jesus' last days, including his crucifixion (hence, the "Passion narrative").

Passover: The most important and widely celebrated annual festival of ancient Jews, which commemorated the Exodus from Egypt under Moses.

Pastoral epistles: New Testament letters that Paul allegedly wrote to two pastors, Timothy (1 and 2 Timothy) and Titus, concerning their pastoral duties. Most critical scholars doubt whether Paul actually wrote them.

Pauline Corpus: All the letters of the New Testament that claim Paul as their author, including the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral epistles.

Pentateuch: Literally, the "five scrolls." The term designates the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Law (or *Torah*) of Moses.

Pentecost: A Jewish agricultural festival that was celebrated 50 days after Passover (the Greek word for 50 is *pentakosia*).

Persephone: Daughter of the Greek goddess Demeter, reported to have been abducted to the underworld by Hades but allowed to return to life every year to be reunited temporarily with her grieving mother; also known as Kore.

Pharisees: A Jewish sect during the days of Jesus that emphasized strict adherence to the laws of the Torah and developed a set of “oral” laws to help them follow this “written” law of Moses.

pseudonymity: The practice of writing under a “false name,” as is evident in a number of pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings from antiquity.

Q source: Source used by Matthew and Luke for the sayings and stories they did not derive from Mark. The source is called Q from the German word *quelle*, “source.” The document is hypothetical (it no longer exists) and is reconstructed by studying the traditions in Matthew and Luke that are not found in Mark.

Qumran: Place where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea; in antiquity, it was evidently the home of a the community of Essenes who used the scrolls as part of their library.

Roman Empire: All the lands (including Palestine) that were conquered by Rome and were ruled, ultimately, by the Roman emperor, starting with Caesar Augustus in 27 B.C. Before Augustus, Rome was a republic, ruled by the Senate.

Sadducees: A Jewish sect associated with the Temple cult and the Jewish priests who ran it. The sect appears to have been made up of the Jewish aristocracy in Judea. Their leader was the High Priest, who served as the highest-ranking official in Jerusalem and the chief liaison with the Roman governor.

scribes, Christian: Christians who copied their sacred Scriptures.

scribes, Jewish: Highly educated experts in the Jewish Law who possibly also copied it.

Sermon on the Mount: Found only in Matthew 5–7, this sermon preserves many of Jesus’ best known and most memorable sayings (including Matthew’s version of the Beatitudes, the antitheses, and the Lord’s Prayer).

Son of God: In most Greco-Roman circles, a person who was born to a god and a mortal and who was, as a result, able to perform miracles or deliver superhuman teachings. In Jewish circles, a person who was chosen to stand in a special relationship with God, including the ancient Jewish Kings.

Son of Man: A term used by Jesus, and some other apocalypticists, to refer to a cosmic judge who would appear from heaven at the end of time.

synagogue: From a Greek word that literally means “being brought together.” A synagogue was a Jewish place of prayer and worship.

Synoptic Gospels: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which tell many of the same stories, sometimes in the same words, so that they can be placed side by side to “be seen together” (the literal meaning of *synoptic*).

Talmud: The great collection of ancient Jewish traditions that includes the Mishnah and the Gemarah (later commentaries written on the Mishnah). There are two different Talmuds, one produced in Palestine in the early 5th century A.D., the other, more authoritative one, produced in Babylon a century later.

textual criticism: A discipline that attempts to establish the original wording of a text on the basis of its surviving manuscripts.

Torah: A Hebrew word meaning “guidance,” “direction,” or more woodenly, “law.” It is often used as a technical term for the Law of God given to Moses or for the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, which were sometimes ascribed to Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Undisputed Pauline epistles: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Scholars are mostly unified in

judging that these letters were actually written by Paul. See **Deutero-Pauline Epistles** and **Pastoral Epistles**.

Biographical Notes

Alexander the Great

Alexander of Macedonia, otherwise known as Alexander the Great was born in 356 B.C., son of King Philip of Macedonia, upon whose assassination he succeeded to the throne at the age of 22. He set out to conquer Greece before moving his armies eastward to overcome Asia Minor, Palestine, and Egypt. His major conquest came over Darius, ruler of the Persian Empire, which extended his territories well into what is modern-day India. Alexander's real historical significance lies in his use of military conquest to spread a previously unheard of cultural unity to the lands around the Mediterranean, the process of *Hellenization*. It played an enormous role in the history of Western civilization. The New Testament, was rooted in Hellenistic culture and written in Greek.

Caesar Augustus (Octavian)

Octavian was the first of the Roman emperors, who transformed Rome from a republic (ruled by a Senate) to an empire (ruled, ultimately, by the emperor). He was born in 63 B.C. to the niece of Julius Caesar and was later adopted as the son of his great-uncle. When Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C., Octavian left Greece (where he was being educated) to avenge his death. He was a member of the first so-called "triumvirate" of power. After defeating fellow triumvir Antony (and Cleopatra) in battle, he emerged as the sole ruler of Rome, and was given the honorific titles "Augustus" (= most revered one) and *Princeps* (= "first citizen"). Augustus used his enormous and unparalleled power and influence to bring stability throughout the empire after many years of internal conflict, to extend the influence of Roman power, and to promote a conservative social agenda that stressed traditional virtues of marriage, family, morality, hard work, and simple living. This was the beginning of what some historians have referred to as the *Pax Romana* (the Roman Peace), an extended period of internal tranquility in the empire. Octavian's rule lasted over 40 years (27 B.C.–A.D. 14).

Constantine the Great

Constantine is not significant for the study of the New Testament except insofar as he was the first emperor, some three centuries after the birth of Jesus, to accept Christianity, to bring to an end its persecution, and to begin to bestow favors on the church that ultimately led to its triumph over the pagan religions of Rome. Born in A.D. 285, Constantine was involved in the early 4th century, as one of Rome's principal generals, in a complicated set of power struggles over the ultimate rulership of Rome. According to his own account delivered to Eusebius, the father of church history and his own biographer, when Constantine marched against his rival Maxentius in Rome in 312 he had a vision of the cross and the words "in this conquer." He took this as a divine sign and, having successfully overcome his opponent in battle, began openly to favor the Christian religion.

His real commitment to Christianity is open to question, as he continued to evidence devotion to pagan deities as well. But he certainly brought an end to persecutions, and once he had consolidated his power, bestowed numerous benefits on the church that made it clearly beneficial for others among the empire's upper classes to convert. From being a still small minority of possibly five per cent of the empire's population at the beginning of the 4th century (demographic numbers are nearly impossible to reach with any certainty), Christians by the end of the century—due in large part to Constantine's conversion—comprised nearly half the populace and became the "official" religion of the state. Constantine died in 337, after receiving baptism on his deathbed.

Jesus

We do not know when Jesus was born, but if it was during the reign of King Herod of Israel, as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke then it must have been sometime before 4 B.C., the date of Herod's death. Jesus was raised in a Jewish home in the small village of Nazareth in Galilee, the northern part of what is now Israel.

As an adult he engaged in an itinerant preaching ministry in largely rural areas of Galilee; there is no record of him visiting any large cities until

his fateful journey to Jerusalem at the end of his life. His message was comparable to that found in the prophets of the Hebrew Bible: the people of Israel must repent or they will be faced with judgment. Jesus, though, gave this message an apocalyptic twist – as did many other religious Jews of his day: the coming judgment would be of cosmic proportions and brought by an emissary from heaven, the Son of Man, who would overthrow the forces of evil and establish God’s kingdom on earth. When this happened, there would be a serious reversal of fortunes: those in power now would be destroyed and those who suffered and were oppressed now would be exalted. People needed to prepare for this historical cataclysm by turning back to God and keeping his Law, especially as interpreted by Jesus himself.

Despite Jesus’ reputation as a healer and exorcist, he was not viewed favorably by Jewish leaders. At the end of his life he came to Jerusalem during a Passover feast, caused a disturbance in the Temple, and raised the ire and fears of the ruling party, the Sadducees, who were intent on keeping the peace and avoiding any riots during such tumultuous times. They had Jesus arrested and turned him over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who ordered him crucified as a trouble maker. Scholars dispute the precise year of his death, but it must have been some time around A.D. 30.

Josephus

Josephus was born to an aristocratic Jewish priestly family in A.D. 37 in Palestine who wrote two important works (one being *The Antiquities of the Jews*, detailing the history of the Jewish People), and the other being an account of the Roman-Jewish wars of the 1st century A.D. that occurred after the life of Jesus. His accounts are among the only non-Scriptural references we have to Jesus. He was highly educated and became an important figure in Judean politics and played a leading role in the Jewish war against Rome A.D.–A.D. 70. He was captured and told the conquering Roman general Vespasian that he would become emperor, which happened after the suicide of Nero. As a reward for his prophetic insight, Vespasian granted Josephus an annual stipend and appointed him to work as a court historian.

Paul the Apostle (Saul of Tarsus)

Paul was a Hellenistic Jew born and raised outside of Palestine. We do not know when he was born, but it was probably sometime during the first decade A.D. Through his own letters and the encomiastic account found in the book of Acts, we can learn something of his history. He was raised as a strict Pharisaic Jew and prided himself on his scrupulous religiosity. At some point in his early adulthood, he learned of the Christians and their proclamation of the crucified man Jesus as the messiah. Incensed by this claim, Paul began a rigorous campaign of persecution against the Christians—only to be converted himself to faith in Jesus through some kind of visionary experience.

Paul then became an ardent proponent of the faith and its best-known missionary. He saw his call as a missionary to the Gentiles and worked in major urban areas in the regions of Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia to establish churches through the conversion of former pagans. A distinctive aspect of his message was that all people, Jew and Gentile, are made right with God through Jesus' death and resurrection and by no other means. The practical payoff was that Gentiles did not need to become Jewish to be among the people of the Jewish God—in particular, the men did not need to become circumcised.

We know about Paul principally through the letters he wrote to his churches when problems arose that he wanted to address. Seven letters in the New Testament indisputably come from his hand; six others claim him as an author, but there are reasons to doubt these claims. According to the book of Acts, Paul was eventually arrested for socially disruptive behavior and sent to Rome to face trial. An early tradition outside of the New Testament indicates that Paul was martyred there, in Rome, during the reign of the emperor Nero, in A.D. 64.

Bibliography

Beker, J. Christiaan. *The Heirs of Paul: Paul's Legacy in the New Testament and in the Church Today*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991. A clear assessment of the theology of the Deutero-Pauline and Pastoral epistles, which tries to understand these books in light of the undisputed Pauline epistles.

Brown, Raymond. *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, 2nd ed. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1993. A massive and exhaustive (but highly popular) discussion of the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. Suitable for anyone who wants to know everything about every detail of the passages.

———. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Anchor Bible Research Library. New York: Doubleday, 1997. A full and authoritative introduction to all the major issues pertaining to the study of the New Testament, by one of the premier New Testament scholars of the second half of the 20th century. It includes extensive and up-to-date bibliographies.

Carter, Warren. *What Are They Saying About Matthew's Sermon on the Mount?* New York: Paulist, 1994. The best introductory sketch of the scholarly debates about the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' best known set of teachings.

Cohen, Shaye. *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987. Perhaps the best place for beginning students to turn for a clear overview of Jewish institutions, practices, and beliefs from roughly the mid-2nd century B.C. to A.D. 200.

Collins, Adela Yarbro. *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984. A superb discussion of the authorship, social context, and overarching message of the Revelation of John.

Donfried, Karl P., ed. *The Romans Debate*, 2nd ed. Peabody, MA: Hendrikson, 1991. A significant collection of essays by eminent New Testament scholars,

each of whom discusses the occasion and purpose of Paul's letter to the Romans, often from different perspectives.

Ehrman, Bart D. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Written by the instructor, this study considers all the evidence for the historical Jesus—including recent archaeological discoveries and noncanonical sources—and argues that he is best understood as an apocalyptic prophet who expected God soon to intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in his good kingdom.

———. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Written by the instructor, this volume provides a historically oriented introduction to all the issues dealt with in this course. It is designed both for use as a college-level textbook and as a resource for anyone interested in the New Testament.

———. *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader*. New York: Oxford, 1998. A collection of all the writings by the early Christians from the 1st century after Jesus' death (i.e., written before A.D. 130), both canonical and noncanonical. It includes the noncanonical Gospels of Peter and Thomas discussed in this course.

———. *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. A study of the ways scribes were influenced by doctrinal disputes in the early church and how they modified their texts of the New Testament to make them conform more closely with their own theological views. It is best suited for more advanced students.

Fitzmyer, Joseph. *Pauline Theology: A Brief Sketch*. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989. A brief and concise, but superb, overview of the major aspects of Paul's theological views.

Frend, W. H. C. *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1965. This classic is the best full-length study of Christian persecution and martyrdom during the first three centuries A.D. The book

tries to understand Christian views of martyrdom in light of the martyrdoms in the Jewish tradition.

Furnish, Victor Paul. *Jesus According to Paul*. Cambridge: University Press, 1993. This slim book provides a concise and insightful discussion of Paul's understanding of Jesus, including the question of how much Paul actually knew about Jesus' life. It is an ideal book for beginning students.

———. *The Love Commandment in the New Testament*. Nashville, 1972. A standard study of the role played by the command to love among the authors of the New Testament.

Gager, John. *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*. Oxford: University Press, 1983. An important and fascinating study of the rise of anti-Semitism among Christians in the early centuries A.D.

Gamble, Harry. *The New Testament Canon: Its Making and Meaning*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985. A clearly written and informative overview of the formation of the canon that shows how, why, and when Christians chose the current 27 books to include in their sacred Scriptures of the New Testament.

Greenlee, J. Harold. *An Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*, 2nd ed. Peabody: MA: Hendrickson, 1995. This slim volume provides a fine introduction to the problems and methods involved in reconstructing the original text of the New Testament.

Hooker, Morna. *The Message of Mark*. London: Epworth, 1983. A clearly written introductory discussion of the most significant features of Mark's Gospel. It is well suited for those just beginning in the field.

Juel, Donald. *Luke–Acts: The Promise of History*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1983. A clearly written discussion of the background of Luke–Acts and the overarching themes found in the two books; ideal for beginning students.

Keck, Leander. *Paul and His Letters*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979. An insightful overview of Paul's theology as expressed in his letters. The book makes an excellent resource for those who are new to the field.

Kingsbury, Jack Dean. *The Christology of Mark's Gospel*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983. A useful discussion of Mark's view of Jesus from a literary perspective; examines the flow of the narrative to find clues to the meaning of the text.

Kysar, Robert. *John the Maverick Gospel*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1976. One of the best introductions to the distinctive features of John's Gospel, paying particular attention to how John differs from the Synoptics in many of its major perspectives on Jesus.

Lane Fox, Robin. *Pagans and Christians*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. A long but fascinating discussion of the relationship of pagans and Christians during the first centuries of Christianity; especially valuable for its brilliant sketch of what it meant to be a "pagan" in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D.

Lindars, Barnabas. *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*. Cambridge: University Press, 1991. A clear statement of the major theological perspectives found in the epistle to the Hebrews.

Meier, John. *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol 1. New York: Doubleday, 1991. An authoritative discussion of the historical Jesus (only the first two volumes are currently available) by a highly knowledgeable scholar. The first volume includes the clearest and most up-to-date discussion of the extra-canonical sources for Jesus' life and the methods used by scholars to determine which traditions in the New Testament are historically accurate.

Metzger, Bruce M. *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. All in all, this is the best introduction to the history, data, and methods of New Testament textual criticism. Portions of the book require a basic knowledge of Greek, but all English readers can use the book as a tremendous resource.

Musurillo, H., ed. *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1972. An intriguing collection of 28 accounts of Christian martyrdom in English translation, taken from eyewitness sources of the 2nd to 4th centuries.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Random, 1976. An enormously popular and provocative account of the views of some of the early Gnostics in relation to emerging Christian orthodoxy.

Parker, David. *The Living Text of the Gospels*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Perhaps the best introduction to New Testament textual criticism for beginners. The author argues that the modifications made by the Christian scribes who copied the text show that they did not see it as a dead object but as a living tradition.

Pilch, J. *What Are They Saying About the Book of Revelation?* New York: Paulist Press, 1978. A clear and useful overview of the perspectives of modern scholars on the book of Revelation.

Powell, Mark A. *What Are They Saying About Acts?* New York: Paulist, 1991. An accessible overview of modern scholarship on the Book of Acts, suited especially for beginning students.

———. *What Are They Saying About Luke?* New York: Paulist, 1989. An excellent survey of modern scholarly views of Luke's Gospel, suited especially for beginning students.

Ruether, Rosemary. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. New York: Seabury, 1974. This compelling and controversial study by a prominent feminist theologian argues that early Christian claims about Jesus as the messiah were, by their very nature, necessarily anti-Semitic.

Roetzel, Calvin. *The Letters of Paul: Conversations in Context*, 3rd ed. Atlanta: John Knox, 1991. Perhaps the best introductory discussion of the Pauline epistles available. The book includes an examination of the issues of authorship and date, as well as a sketch of the major themes of each letter.

Sanders, E. P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. London: Penguin, 1993. One of the best introductions to the life and teachings of the historical Jesus. It is well suited for beginning students.

———. *Judaism Practice and Belief, 63 B.C.E-66 C.E.* London and Philadelphia: SCM Press/Trinity Press International, 1992. This is a full, detailed, and authoritative account of what it meant to be a Jew immediately before and during the time of the New Testament, by one of the great New Testament scholars of our generation.

Sandmel, Samuel. *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament?* Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978. A clear and interesting discussion, from the perspective of a prominent Jewish scholar of the New Testament, of whether parts of the New Testament should be viewed as anti-Semitic.

———. *Judaism and Christian Beginnings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. A well-written, clear, and insightful sketch of the Jewish religion from the time of Jesus; suitable for those who are relatively new to the field.

Schrage, W. *The Ethics of the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988. Covers the major aspects of the ethical teachings found in New Testament writings and their contemporary relevance, by a prominent German scholar.

Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. New York: Macmillan, 1968. This is the classic study of the major attempts to write a biography of Jesus up to the first part of the 20th century (the German original appeared in 1906). It is also one of the first and perhaps the most important attempt to portray Jesus as a Jewish apocalypticist.

Senior, Donald. *What Are They Saying About Matthew?* New York: Paulist Press, 1983. An overview of what scholars in recent years have concluded about Matthew's Gospel; an excellent resource for beginning students.

Shelton, Jo-Ann, ed. *As the Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. A highly useful

anthology of ancient texts that deals with every major aspect of life in the Roman world, including religion.

Sloyan, Gerard S. *What Are They Saying About John?* New York: Paulist, 1991. An accessible sketch of the modern scholarly debates concerning major aspects of John's Gospel.

Smith, D. Moody. *The Theology of John*. Cambridge: University Press, 1994. A clearly written and incisive discussion of the major themes of John, by one of the premier scholars of the Fourth Gospel.

Tatum, W. Barnes. *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1982. A superb introduction to the problems and methods involved in establishing historically reliable traditions in the Gospels.

Turcan, Robert. *The Cults of the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. A superb introduction to some of the major religious cults in the Roman Empire from roughly the time of early Christianity (and before).

Vermes, Geza. *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels*. New York: Macmillan, 1973. A readable but very learned study of Jesus in light of traditions of other Jewish "holy men" from his time, written by a prominent New Testament scholar at Oxford.

Wedderburn, A. J. M. *The Reasons for Romans*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988. The most complete book-length discussion of the reasons that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans: to explain his gospel of salvation apart from the Law to the predominantly Gentile Roman Christians, in light of the tensions between Jews and Gentiles there and of his own impending journey to Jerusalem.

Wenham, David. *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995. This book emphasizes the close ties between Paul and Jesus and tries to counter the view that Paul radically altered the religion he had inherited through the Christian tradition.

Wilken, Robert. *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. A popular and clearly written account of the mainly negative views of Christians held by several Roman authors; particularly suitable for beginning students.